

Converge: Novel Excerpts

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract:

In the medieval country of Vicloran, two travelers battle gender stereotypes and prejudices reflective in our modern society, overcoming family tragedy and breaking free of self-imposed constraints. A disgraced soldier fights with the memories of his lost family while a renegade assassin fights to earn the respect her mother deserved in life. They travel to remove a dangerous assassin from power, each with their own motives for personal healing. Their journeys and confrontations force them to look at the importance of living for the ones they loved and protecting those that cannot defend themselves. The two rely on each other as family and as their only home.

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Author's Statement

The creation of my honors thesis was a long and arduous process, a process I had never undertaken in any year of schooling. Although novel writing is my desired career path, I now comprehend some of the hardships that will be presented. Having spent months working on this piece the goals and expectations continually changed, not only revealing my shortsighted hopes but the continual learning of myself as a writer and as a person. Originally, my goal was to look deeper into perceptions, how someone is not as they appear and what could be hiding beneath the surface, but as my classes progressed during the semester the perception of gender stereotypes and prejudices had become important as well. Many hours were spent in the research of medieval times and fantasy fiction elements, as well as the view of gender roles and the limitations of personal perception. Such research was not only spent by reading various articles, academic papers and books, but the observance of everyday interaction and the assistance of my project advisor, Mrs. Angela Jackson-Brown. The process of creating this piece was not as fastidious as I would like to claim, particularly since I had almost a full year to work on it; nevertheless, hard work was put into this and I hope it shows.

Maintaining a creative writing major throughout my college career has provided me with an ample amount of potential ideas that I had written over the years for future projects. This thesis gave me a chance to work on one of these concepts. The format for my project was initially created in my novel writing class in the spring of 2015. I wanted to create a story that followed the perspectives of two characters, essentially creating two different stories that intermingled. What is special about this is the structure; depending on which side of the book one is holding it determines which story will be read. The first story will be read on the right

pages while the second story appears upside down and on the left pages, so when it is flipped over the second story is readable and the first is then upside down.

Having chosen to work with a two person lead story, I had to think of how to make each story sustainable on its own yet able to intermingle with the other. First I had to think about the combined plotline the characters would follow. I started with the end goal, that of wanting the king dead, and worked backwards to find out why they had their separate reasons for desiring such an outcome. With the experience of reading such tales since I was young, I hoped to avoid as many cliché's and "seen it" moments as possible. With the goal of understanding individual perception in mind I was able to create a rough story outline: a male (ex-soldier) and female (assassin) would meet and agree to work together with the goal of killing the king, he for his family and she for her country. This I was able to accomplish before the summer of 2015.

After work during the summer I spent days fleshing out plot points as well as fleshing out my characters. Hunched over a large pad of paper and with various colored markers at my disposal I was able to outline the interaction my characters had and when, listing the various sub-characters that would appear at each point, and drawing a rough map of the land this world would encompass, creating names for the terrain, cities, and rivers. Many of the names have been derived from Irish/Gaelic origins, others were of my own creation. When I was unable to be at my pad to create, I would ponder the storyline and characters while running on the treadmill where I was able to absent-mindedly follow the flow of the story without the pressure of the permanent marker. During the summer I also took an honors colloquium on medieval castles, a fantastic tool that greatly aided in my knowledge for the world I was creating. In spite of this, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of creating a novel for the first time and so spent most of my time worrying if I was going to accomplish the project rather than actually putting in the time to

write. At this stage, my main concern was the content in the middle of the book and how I would fill it, a sad admittance but a transparent look at how my project came together.

Into the 2015 fall semester I started a routine of waking at 6am every day to write the scenes; this routine got me back on track as I was able to write at least 20 pages a week. About every two weeks I was able to meet with my project advisor to discuss the progress of my work and bounce ideas until I was ready to begin the revision process; unfortunately, shortly after I fell off the wagon and began sleeping in, which slowed my progress to an agonizing pace. Although I continued to look through various sources for character development and gender portrayal, the pages per week halted and so pitched me into an overwhelmed state. Fortunately however, I was taking the senior seminar class that focused on narrative in gaming. For this class I had to write the script of a game and with the permission of my professor I used my thesis storyline, forcing me to constantly work on the story as well as see it through a different medium.

I created an interactive story of the prepared scenes that comprised my thesis, but because the reader had choices in the action I had to create alternate endings and viable options for scene explorations, adding depth to the world. The creative atmosphere of my class project also assisted in my middle story content problem, forcing me to realize the importance of each scene and the constant need for some sort of drama. I spent the final week of the class writing the last scenes I would include in my thesis, the climax scene of each character. At this point, my process took a lot of concentration and hard pushes to make things happen; however, because of my languid nature I was forced to change my thesis proposal from writing a full length novel to only preparing four excerpts that derived from the book. I kick myself for having failed my own goal but I was able to turn all my efforts into revising and perfecting the excerpts.

The revision process was my favorite part as I was able to look more closely at the story and how it was supported by the characters. In order to take a line by line examination of my thesis I printed out each of my revised copies, marking up the pages and holding the characters comparative sections to ensure consistency. Ultimately, I printed three rough drafts to mark with my pen. This not only gave me the chance to see the progress I was making, but allowed me to hold the largest amount of writing I had ever produced, which is an amazing feeling. If my novel is like any other, it will never be out of the revision process as I will continue to think of new ways to strengthen the story and appeal to the reader. With a lot of work and concentration, I hope to finish my novel by the fall of 2016.

Although the process took care of the minor grammatical and mechanical errors, it also slightly altered the overall plotline. The desire for the main characters to kill the king was a stretched plot point and therefore needed changed, but the two needed a common enemy that had some real force. This antagonist started as a man that overtook the king without the country knowing, therefore controlling the kingdom for his own selfish gain; but something was still missing, there needed to be a stronger reason for my characters to care. So I decided to make a connection from the antagonist to my female character, making them childhood friends that separated as they grew into their true selves. I think this relationship not only strengthened both character's backstories but the piece as a whole; however, this left me feeling that my male's backstory was lacking in comparison. To make this new antagonist a common enemy, I made him the cause of my male protagonist's family loss. This way my male character was driven to attack the antagonist, and my female protagonist was emotionally connected to her childhood friend.

I felt confident in those choices, yet the plot of the story was shifted and begged the question, why does it matter what these characters are doing? To address that, I added an antagonistic kingdom that would “up the ante” and pressure the protagonists to continue on their journey, as well as make them put aside their personal issues for the sake of peoples safety, realizing what truly matters. Because I made this decision, my ending was altered drastically and the stories required an epilogue for each character to explain their emotional states. From my first draft to my most recent, the endings have changed from the king being murdered, to the king not being murdered, to the antagonist being murdered, to the antagonist surviving and the antagonistic kingdom coming with an army. This ending propels my novel into a series, proposing a second book that would detail the attack of the enemy kingdom, which is inferred from the epilogues.

Although I was unable to attain a full length novel, I believe I accomplished my goal of understanding personal perception and countering gender roles. My main characters have certain understandings of themselves based on influences from their society and choices. The female character comes from a male-centric land that holds women at a lower social level, affecting her relationship with her mother, her father, and her own self-worth. The main product of her country is assassins but it is not the work of women, yet her mother learned to fight from her father, inadvertently teaching the female protagonist. The criticism she and her family received molded her personality and self-doubts, making her strong and resilient yet unwilling to trust anyone. Her mother’s death made it all the more important to prove her skill as an assassin, and in the same process proving the worth of her mother’s ability. After the tragic end to her role model her father succumbed to the sexist beliefs of the country, demanding that the female protagonist refrain from combat training to follow the traditional woman’s duties. But her mother’s influence was greater, which inspired her resolve to infiltrate the male protagonist’s

country to claim it for her own and demonstrate not only her ability, but her mothers and women in general. As the female protagonist learns more about who's really governing the male protagonist's country, she realizes that proving herself to those who hold little regard for her gender isn't as important as being there for people who need her. She remembers that her gender doesn't define her but her actions do.

My male protagonist is a native of the setting, also of the male-centered mindset that women, although valuable, have their place. Besides learning in his journey that women have more worth and abilities than he was raised to believe, he overcomes the male stereotype of controlling his emotions and any given situation. Having been surrounded by the army since a young boy, the strong-male type has always been the standard and following orders was how he held any respect from other men. Once he stopped following orders, his honor has been in question. The death of his family makes it apparent to him how much he relied on them for happiness and love. He faces his emotions and his past as he travels with the female protagonist, remembering why he refused to follow orders in the first place: to protect those who were helpless. He learns to work from his past, with the smile of his deceased wife in his heart, to defend all those he was forced to murder in the military. His journey with the female protagonist helps him open up with his feelings, discovering that strength isn't controlling emotions but trusting someone else to handle them.

The result of my project can largely be attributed to the classes I have taken for my creative writing concentration and honors courses. The courses focused on poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and screenwriting each contributed elements that rounded out the story in setting and description, whether it was the flow of the sentence or the vision created in the

readers head. Particularly, my novel writing class prepared me for story set-up and the organization thereof, as well as writing several pages in a given session. I had the fantastic opportunity of taking an honors colloquium in medieval castles which I was able to use in my medieval theme, although my fictional world is only loosely based on the time period. This class and its text, *Life in a Medieval Castle*, was my main source of information for the setting, building description, everyday life practices, and the overall social interaction. Besides acquiring information for creating a story, I was influenced by my research into gender dynamics and stereotypes, particularly in gaming for the interactive story version of my thesis.

My gender studies helped form the image of my protagonists. I wanted to create dynamic characters that didn't only counter gender stereotypes but still honored the facets of their gender. Females are often hyper-sexualized, especially strong lead characters, because it seems that a woman's power comes from the influence her body has on men and women. My female protagonist wears a black cloak that hides her body and when the cloak allows the underneath to show her clothes are fairly baggy, hardly clinging to her body unlike most women portrayed today; this way, her power comes not from her body but from her personality. Similarly, men are sexualized with bulging muscles, distinguishing a "man's man" from a "lesser" one due to the lack of toned muscles. My male protagonist has muscles because of years of long work as a field hand, yet shirtless in the presence of a female character he feels uncomfortable, holding no regard for the influence of his body but all for the vulnerability his past has left him.

From this piece in particular I want readers to understand that everyone has struggles they don't feel comfortable admitting to, regardless of what others may think. The level of importance can only be determined by those affected by the hardship and all that is required of those outside the situation is compassion and a willingness to understand, as well as a mind to accept that there

are things that just can't be understood without the same experiences. I want my characters to prove that relying on another is not a weakness but a strength, a cliché notion I know but a notion that has so much power: *a chain with two links is stronger than one*. Not only should my protagonists show that reliance is a strength but it is human nature; both characters initially rely on themselves for getting things done and handling their emotions but without realizing they begin to depend on each other, it isn't until the end that they consciously and emotionally accept their friendship.

The excerpts of my book, which comprises my thesis, only gives a glimpse into the world I've spent so long creating and I can't wait to begin fleshing it out, but such an endeavor didn't happen without inspiration from the many books I've read over the years. Books such the *Septimus Heap* series written by Angie Sage, *The Bartimeaus Trilogy* written by Johnathan Stroud, *The Dragon Rider* written by Cornelia Funke, *The Sword of Shannara Trilogy* written by Terry Brooks, and many others. Each of these authors created worlds ranging from magical to realistic. These examples for inspiration have helped me not only create a world but do so without the uncertainty of limitation. Much like these novels, my own would fall under the fiction Young Adult (YA) category, although without magical elements its medieval setting inadvertently places it in a fantastical realm.

The many hours and research that has gone into my thesis makes this my proudest achievement to date. The length of a novel has always been daunting to me, and the amount of detail and hard work that goes into creating a world for the story seemed too far out of my skill set, but the long process has been rewarding in more ways than one. Not only have I learned many aspects that go into writing a long piece, I have learned how to appreciate the time and effort that goes into such an endeavor. I have also learned how to be proud of my work, at the

end of the day I poured more into this story than all that I've written since I first picked up a pencil.

*Converge*Chapter One: Liam's Story

"Again!"

Searing pain stretched over my back and throughout my body as the whip tore my flesh away. My nerves screamed and blood pounded my ears, images of my wife and daughter flashed in my mind.

"Again!"

Another slash and I clenched my jaw, biting my tongue into a bloody nerve. Sweat stung my open flesh as I spat red. My wife and daughter burned into my mind. I clung to the wooden post out of exhaustion.

"Again!"

My muscles failed under the pain and my vision faded to black.

Like out of a fog an image of my wife and daughter appeared before my eyes, laughing in the sun and shimmering brown hair whipping in the wind. They looked to me, as though they hadn't seen me watching, and motioned for me to join them. I took one step, two. My family faded the closer I became I ran until there was nothing but darkness.

I woke up sluggish, pain becoming more and more apparent. Groggy from sleep and immobilized by the throbbing in my back, I knew someone was in the servant's quarters with me. I could only see the wooden walls and the shadows cast by the fire from the hearth, but I heard the splash of water. Faint mumbling told me that it was Lena, a woman from the fields, the one I had avoided since the day I was brought to the castle ten years ago. Sudden pain squeezed

my eyes shut, colors swirled, but I force myself to look. She was about to put a cloth and herbs on my back when I grabbed her forearm.

"Stop, Lena." I whispered through agony.

"You need this while your wounds are still fresh."

I wasn't going to let go, even in my weakened state she still couldn't break free from my grasp. Such a weak woman...

"Liam, please!" She begged.

"No, no, no, I'm fine." I whispered as my strength failed me. I felt the cool of the floor on my hand before everything went black.

There on my stomach with my chin digging into my hands, the slightest move overwhelmed my nerves in a flood of burning sensations. I hated just lying here as the other field hands pulled extra loads of work to make up for my absence, the steward was not a lenient man. But I couldn't stand by when a guard threatened the old woman, the one who took everyone in as her own. She took too long to carry her basket of grain to the wagon, but before the guard could lay the first blow I blocked the son-of-a-bitch and struck him. I earned the whipping, as I do every time.

Lena kept coming in from time to time attending my wounds, I just let her. But I couldn't shake the feelings no matter how little I looked at her. She had defended me two years ago when I tried to get more food for the others she was locked up for a time as punishment. Ever since then there had been something about her... Memories of my wife slapped waves of guilt in my gut and my daughter's sweet face made me cover my eyes, choking out any thought of Lena. I tried to get up but the burning pain of crackling wounds shot me back down. Without warning

Lena came through the door carrying a bowl of steaming water and clean linen, her sweet smile making my gut ache.

"Oh! I'm glad to see you're awake." She settled down on the floor next to my bunk and gently took the herb and bandages from my back, her fingertips brushing my skin.

"You really don't have to do all this." I tried to sound convincing.

"I want to," She replied pleasantly, sponging my back with soaked wadded linen. "It's the least I can do."

"I don't deserve such treatment." I kept my gaze forward, tracing the veins in the wooden wall. I tried not to think about the cool of the cloth on my skin.

"Nonsense, you stood up for a woman who couldn't defend herself," she said. "If Eamon thought you deserved such a lashing then you deserve even greater praise."

I winced at the pressure she applied to my gashes, causing her to stop. She just sat.

"You're the only one who's had the courage to stand up to these men and we all thank you for that."

I tried to keep my eyes on the wall ahead of me but the sweetness in her voice drew my gaze. Her face was cast down in respectful, smooth skin warped by smeared mud and sweat. I wanted to reach out to her but everything in me said I didn't deserve such admiration, or even the pleasure of happiness, not after everything that's happened. I just have to keep my distance from everyone like I had planned when I first got here. As I contemplated her face she spoke again.

"You know, it's funny, we've been in the fields all this time, yet this is the first time we've really been able to talk like this." She smiled at me, betraying her youthful yet haggard appearance. I turned away, my own advancing age contrasted her innocence, my scruff of a beard and greying hair, almost long enough to be tied up in a strap. I remembered the look in her

eyes, eyes that hadn't seen near as much as I have. I couldn't subject her to my past. She faltered a little but continued. "I always wondered what you had gone through before coming here, you always seem so distant and unwilling to befriend anyone, yet you stand up for us when the guards lash out."

Without warning my chest raced. No one had asked what I had been through but I never intended to tell, yet these feelings want me to confide in her. I turned my gaze back to her, opening my mouth to speak but I couldn't find the words. I just couldn't tell Lena about the wars, the pillaging, or the horrible atrocities I was ordered to do. She has enough to be horrified by here. Grueling hours in the field and little sleep to be got in the servant's quarters, all the while the Lord of the manor Eamon lay comfortable in his bedchamber, I just couldn't tell her. Eamon...if he wasn't the King's right hand man he would be dead by now. But I turned my head back around to face the wall, the pain and torment in my head choked my throat.

"I was born here, even met my husband here...", She paused. I remembered him, he was a good man and worked hard. He would set the field for planting using the oxen and plough, until the day they got loose. "After he died I felt so alone...so alone."

Without a word Lena continued with her work, I felt fresh herbs on my back, easing the burning sensation, but the tension mounted. Apparently finished she gathered her things and stood, speaking once more before leaving.

"I'll be back tonight to remove the bandages...and I'm sorry, for, what has hardened you."

She passed in front of me to the door and left without a glance. I hadn't realized I wasn't breathing until she left, unwanted tears poured from my eyes as the memories of my family ricocheted through my mind. Smiling, joyful faces were quickly replaced with agony and fear,

they looked to me for help but I was useless. I tried to turn away from their faces but they only followed me, begged me. But I couldn't help them! I deserve these gashes and the burning, stinging pain that emanated from them. I twisted to make it hurt worse, the pain took my breath away. I punched the bedding and screamed into my pillow, screamed at the image of my wife and daughter murdered a few yards ahead of me, the only image I see any more with clarity. I was excruciatingly aware that I was alone in this world when the sound of crackling fire was all that could calm me.

Eamon grew ever present in my mind, the man responsible for the raw flesh of my back, who held the pistol that fired into the bodies of my wife and daughter. I can still feel the burns of the rope that strapped me to the tree, forced to watch. Eamon had turned to me, a crooked smile as I screamed for my family.

A loud bang from the door jarred me out of this nightmare, my face hot and wet. I buried my head into the bedding and remained still. A grunt from a guard then the door slammed, I was alone again, and hoped a dreamless sleep would take me. Thoughts of revenge against Eamon had been frequent in my mind when he first brought me to his castle, but years of guilt and back-breaking work numbed my being. I was resigned to die here.

Chapter Two

I paced in front of the hearth, the pain had subsided enough to move around though my back still throbbed, the fabric of my shirt kept my skin tender. For two weeks I had been stuck in these quarters, glued to the mattress and plagued by nightmares of my past. Soldiers murdering innocent families, my own hands bloodied... I never thought my own family would be caught in it all. Anger at my naivety welled inside me, physical pain altogether forgotten.

"How could I not realize..." I said aloud. "the manipulation...those families..."

I stared into the open flames, streaking shadows along the walls and across the cots and hay mattresses of the other workers.

"Workers..." To think we were just workers, we're forced to stay here. Without provocation the death of my family stood in my head, but instead I held the pistol. Quickly I turned from the fire and rubbed the heat and image from my eyes.

"I may be too late for them ...but maybe I can save others."

I jumped at the sound of the door, pain seared through my stiff back. Lena walked in and smiled that sweet smile at me.

"You must be feeling much better! This is the first day you've been walking. How do you feel?"

I shrugged, this wasn't the first time I had been about.

"Just like riding a horse you never forget."

Somehow her smile widened further as she held fresh linen and the bowl of water.

"Then I'll change your bandage for the last time." She motioned for me to sit on the matt in front of the hearth. As I sat she grabbed a stool and sat behind me. Rather nervously I did as guided as she moved my shirt up my torso and over my head, through my outstretched arms. My

chest tightened as her gentle touch removed the previous day's bandages. She dabbed away with her wad of linen and sent chills through my body.

"Thank you." I said, the quiet maddening. She didn't respond but continued her work.

We sat there for a while, I tried to concentrate on the fire but each touch sent shivers through my limbs. I remained upright and rigid, trying not to flinch under the pain and the shocks Lena's touches caused. She used her small, soft hand to grasp my shoulder for more pressure. I took in a sharp breath as my stomach summersaulted, my mind conjuring and denying romantic thoughts.

"Are you finished?" I choked out, my feelings and urges were unforgiveable. My wife deserves respect, even in death. I had to get away from Lena.

"Almost." She moved down my back, following the rough lines of old scars, then back up over my muscles. Her fingernails faintly trailed my skin after the cloth in her hand, tingling every nerve to the point of bursting. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard the linen drop in the water but my reprieve was cut short as she fanned my back, the chills blurred my vision. I jolted to my feet, careful to keep from tearing my wounds open.

"Thank you again for what you've done, but I really should be getting on." I grabbed my tunic from her lap and struggled to pull it over my head, momentarily blinded by the fabric. I felt her tender hands brush against my sides as she reached to pull my shirt down. Fear welled in my belly as the fabric grazed my skin, this was too close. My head finally through, our faces were only inches away. I stared into her green eyes, glancing at the pink hue of her lips and the gentle slope of her cheek bones into her short chin. My mind was frozen as she leaned towards me, and I towards her. Her soft lips met mine and a spark shot through my body, her hands cupped my face. My urges controlled me now as I wrapped my arms around her small body, hugging her

close. I felt her heartbeat on my chest, my own wild pulse drumming in my ears. I unwrapped my arms and drew my hands along her body. Going up her arms, my thumbs rubbed her field worn hands as they held my face. But they were clear of scars, scars of the burns my wife had gotten from the boiling kettle at our home. I pulled away from Lena and brought her hands down between us. I studied them then, realizing how different they were from my wife's. Before Lena could speak the door opened and she dropped her hands, turning to address a servant boy.

"The guards are looking for you, Lena." He said innocently.

"Thank you, I'm coming."

I could feel her eyes on me but I just stared at the floor. She left without a word, taking the boy with her. I pulled the stool closer to the fire and sat down, covering my face against the flames.

I kept to myself like usual as I carefully cut down the stalks of grain, avoiding any time alone with Lena. It had been a couple days since the kiss and I had refused her entry into the quarters while I rested. I moved on down the rows, gently grabbing what I cut though my back ached at the effort. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lena a distance off, every so often she looked at me but kept to herself. The day was hot, just like all the others, but the sun was going down and soon it would be too dark to work, already several sheaves of grain were being made. Intermittent insects sounded, preparing for the night. Crows and other birds flew overhead. From the castle rode two guards, each on a dark horse that wore leather face protectors. They came to a stop at the edge of the field and just watched us from their horses. I continued to work but kept an eye on them. I did so for the next half hour, cut the grain and watched for any problems. The sun was more than half way hidden by the horizon.

"Alright! That's it for the day, start loading up the wagon." One of the guards called from his horse as the other jumped down. I went to the end of the row and placed the stalks I had gathered together, bundled them and made for the wagon. The line was shorter than usual today, many of the workers had been kept at the castle to arrange food for a guest Eamon was hosting. If we collected enough grain our day would be over and we could be in for the night.

"Hey."

I jumped at Lena's voice, almost knocking the sheave out of my arms. I turned to confirm that it was her, a decision I regretted as I returned forward.

"Hey," she whispered. "Why are you avoiding me? I thought that kiss was—"

"Shhh." I cut her off and hoped to have shut her up, I didn't need anyone knowing about what happened between us. I betrayed my wife the day she died, I couldn't do it again.

"No, why won't you even look at me?" She persisted.

I turned enough for her to hear me without any chance of misunderstanding.

"You helped me with my wounds, which I thanked, and that's that." I said. The sooner the line was through the sooner I could seclude myself.

"That's that, huh?"

I tuned her out as she mumbled annoyances to herself, but something was happening at the front of the line.

"This isn't enough old man! Get back in the field and finish collecting." The guard pushed the man back into a stumble. I quickly stepped my way to them, happy to leave Lena behind me.

“Oh good, it’s the ambassador of the people, the great Liam.” The guard mocked, his ugly face just waited for my fist. “This old fool hasn’t collected near enough, he will remain in the field until he has finished.”

“Oh is that all?”

I turned to the old man, his back curved from years of hard labor, and replaced his small reave with my large one, making it almost too heavy for him to carry.

“Now he has more than enough. I’ll stay in the field.”

“The old man doesn’t get out of work that easy.” The guard said with authority. “Liam get back to the—“

“You’d rather an old man collect the rest?” Liam cut him off. “You’ll be out here for hours watching him take his time, whereas I can be done within one.”

In annoyance the guard nodded to me. The old man thanked me as I turned back to the field, the guards cursing me as I went. The line continued as usual as I started collecting grain again, darkness stretched over the sky leaving only a sliver of the sun to be seen. It was always bittersweet working in the fields, my family grew up tilling the land and managing the cattle. My father earned the land as a general in the king’s army, while his father didn’t have a dime to his name. Honor was important to him, but it wasn’t until I was a captain that I realized how important honor was.

“Get back in the field, wench!”

I turned to see Lena shoved backward yet managing to stay on her feet. She walked towards me with a half full basket on her hip. I turned away, knowing she had dumped her grain. I stayed focused on cutting the grain faster than before. Last I could tell she was far behind but a

sudden snap of a stalk drew my attention. The tension was vexing but I'd rather have that than talk.

"That was really nice, what you did back there." She said sincerely.

I mumbled a little but kept my head down, listening to the sounds of insects and the progressing line of workers hoping to turn in for the night. Before long the line had gotten through and each worker placed their grain onto the wagon that would be taken to the silo. They all started for the castle and their warm beds while Lena and I, and one of the guards, stayed in the field. The oncoming dusk reminded me of those summer evenings with my brother's in the woods, taking turns scaring each other. I tried to stay focused on getting out of the field and away from Lena but too many memories slowed my progress. The darkening sky took me back to life on my family's land when my mother would make cabbage soup, my favorite. My father's presence was nearly absent in my recollections as war was abundant in my youth.

"Why are you treating me so?"

I broke out of my reverie at Lena's voice.

"I'm just trying to work." I moved ahead.

"But when we kissed—"

"No!" I spun around to face her, fear in her innocent eyes. "It was a mistake and it never should have happened."

"But what's so wrong about it? Is it really so awful that we like each other?"

I stared at her for a moment catching my breath.

"Yes."

I turned back and moved further down the row. Night covered us as the hour pushed on and cold breezes made working hard. I thought again on my family, my parents and brothers.

Being the youngest of my family was something my two brothers made painfully clear, but we all followed in line to the army. War hadn't spared them, taking my father and eldest brother in battle, my mother in heartache and disease. Only my brother Galvyn and I survived the fighting, but it's my brother that's doing any living. The guard watching Lena and I had climbed onto his horse to wait but I could tell he was as ready as we were to get in.

"Are you done yet?" He yelled, his voice carried over the fields and beyond into the forest at the far edge of the property. He cursed under his breath. "Let me see what you've got."

I started over, Lena followed close behind. We didn't have near as much as we had before but I hoped the guy was tired and cold enough to let us go. I lifted my bundle and Lena her basket for inspection, he grunted.

"You expect me to let you sleep with this lousy amount? Get back out there." He ordered, cursing himself again. "Faster than the old man my ass." Lena and I were walking back when I heard the guard say to himself "why did I have to get stuck with this job?"

I stopped immediately, almost dropping my sheave. Lena turned to me but I was frozen, I had heard those words, that voice, before, on the day my wife and child were murdered. On that day a guard had been standing off with another, readied with a crossbow at my body in case I pulled myself free from the tree. The son-of-a-bitch had the gall to ask "why did I have to get stuck with this job?"

"Liam, what's wrong?" Lena asked as she stood in front of me. I stared at her face, the anger of that day welled through me. For years I had blamed myself for what had happened, if only I had followed orders my family would still be alive. Lena's worried gaze reminded me of my wife's and in an instant I knew what she would have said, it wasn't my fault. That horrible day, she didn't look at me with fear or anger but with her calm reassuring gaze, her love.

"What's the matter then? Get your sorry butt into that field." The guard pushed me forward and removed the last bit of restraint I could muster. Anger fueled my military training as I grabbed my hand-sickle and slashed at the guard's abdomen. Blood poured down his body, the fabric of his tunic absorbing what it could. Lena shrieked as he fell to the ground, gasping for life.

"That was my family." I yelled at him.

"What did you do!" Lena shook as she bent down to stop the bleeding but he was gone.

"What he deserved." I wiped the blade off in the grass and put it in my belt. I started running for the castle when I heard her.

"Where are you going!" Lena yelled.

I stopped for a moment and turned to face her.

"I'm not done yet." I turned to go, there was no time to explain.

I continued on to the castle, leaving Lena with her futile attempts to save the man's life. Before reaching the gate I wiped my bloody hand on the grass and rolled up my red splattered sleeves. It was late enough that the guards were on low alert and took no notice of me as I snuck passed a card game, scurrying from shadow to shadow. Something I had learned in the army. The lower bailey was an open field enclosed by the great wall that protected the main housing but I managed to stay along the edge of the lesser hall, heading as fast as I could for the great hall, for Eamon.

Down the passage between the lesser hall and the kitchen I slipped into the pantry, passed the loaves of bread stacked on the shelves and to the catty-corner door leading into the kitchen. I hid in the alcove of the door as servants were busy managing leftovers of the night's meal and gathering the serving platters to be soaked in steaming hot water. With some backs turned and

others out of the kitchen I snuck passed them, bypassing the cellar, and down the stairs that would lead me to the back of the great hall.

Finally there, I paused to breathe and listen to the movements within the hall. This was a moment I never thought would be. Two voices were caught in conversation, one I recognized as Eamon's but the other was a female voice with a strange accent. They were discussing trade, I never thought Eamon would discuss trade with a woman. I peeked around to see where his steward stood but he was nowhere to be found. I had to wait for the opportune moment to avoid the woman from getting stuck in the middle of all this...this revenge. Lena was already in further than I ever wanted.

"My dear woman, this kingdom is in the most profitable point of its history, what benefit may we have if we were to ally ourselves with Quidahb?" Eamon's deep voice was grating to my ears.

"Although Vicloran has proven itself not to be trifled with, its reputation for relationships in trade is the lowest I have ever seen."

"My lady you do not understand, the reputation you claim we maintain is the opposite in our eyes," Eamon sounded more soothing this time. I leaned out a bit to see him stretch his hand over the woman's, her dark gaze darting from her hand to Eamon. She had a swarthy complexion, smooth skin and long black hair that pulled to one side, held together by a long leather band. Eamon continued, "It is not amiable relations that make money, it's the fear of losing that relation that influences our allies."

"Do you not think you could accomplish more by maintaining both views?" She persisted, removing her hand from under his and placing it in her lap. That got him. He sat up straight in annoyance.

"My dear, I suppose such tactics are better spent elsewhere, maybe in the market place or the parlor, but when it comes to the world you cannot threaten a man's family and expect them to appreciate the flowers you send for their deceased."

The room fell quiet as the woman studied Eamon, her own face unreadable.

"Then I suppose that is all we have to discuss, until my husband arrives." She said evenly and stood, sliding her chair back. Eamon stood in response as the woman took her leave, her black cape swaying with every step until she disappeared behind the large wooden doors of the hall. Eamon slumped back into his chair, his hand stroking his beard. He was alone. I stepped into view before the steward could be called.

"Good evening, Eamon." I said, slight satisfaction crept through me at catching him off guard.

"What are you doing here." Eamon stated.

"Well you should know, you put me here." I said, ready to make my anger evident.

Eamon made no response but stood slowly, the gap between us closing.

"So what are you going to do," He smirked. "Kill me?"

"Yes."

I lunged at him, knocking him against the table, and withdrew my blade. Swiftly Eamon got out of my grasp and landed a solid punch to my jaw. I staggered backward at the crunch and ringing in my head, but I forced passed it and tackled Eamon to the ground. We rolled on the wood, the closed gashes in my back threatening to open again. I punched him hard but missed with my blade. His fist made contact with the other side of my jaw. In my momentary daze he kicked me off but I rolled to a standing position. He stood and chuckled.

"Is that it? You've had ten years to concoct a plan and this, this is it?" He laughed with a grin I was more than ready to take off. "I should have listened to Talon and killed you there."

"The death of my family crippled me and I swore I wouldn't kill again not after everything you made me do." I lunged at him again, deflecting his jab to punch him in the face, knocking him to the ground once more. I straddled him as I made to swipe my blade across his neck. "Your blood is worthy of my blade!"

With one hand he held my sickle back and the other he dug into my throat. We strained to overpower the other, but my years of field work gave me an edge. With one my surge of strength I knocked Eamon's hand free and slashed at his throat, blood sprayed and he lay limp. I coughed for air and my vision appeared to clear. The murderer of my wife and daughter was dead before me. But they were still gone, my family was gone. Before I could stand the woman from Eamon's dinner ran next to me.

"We need to go, now!" She grabbed hard and yanked me up toward the door. We ran through and out into the expanse of the middle bailey that separated the northern and southern ends of the castle. We stayed along the stone wall until we came upon the postern that opened into the woods. My mind raced to keep up, how did this woman know about this opening? She continued to pull me through the woods that hugged the north side of the castle, I didn't even know my way through them, but there was no time to stop and talk. Headed toward the east, I could hear shouts from the castle. Someone found Eamon.

The wood lasted what felt like an eternity, my lungs burned and the strength in my body was fading fast. With every stride the pain in my back grew worse but she didn't slow, how is she not tired? Before long I could see the light of the moon at the edge of the trees and a horse

waiting beside the stream that flowed along the castle. She let me go then and swiftly positioned herself on the beast.

“Quick, get on! We don’t have much time!” She pulled me up before I could answer, my gashes tearing open. She clicked her tongue and dug her heels into the horse’s side and we were off, rushing alongside the stream and towards the east. I clung to her abdomen, burying my face in her back at the pain of my wounds. I felt her spur the horse on, already her hair whipped into my face, the wind roaring past my ears. We made it down the countryside at breakneck speed. I appreciated her haste but my grip was weakening and I couldn’t imagine the horse taking much more of this. My mind drifted to the days when my wife and I farmed the portion of land my brother had given us with his inheritance. We lived happily, working hard on the land and showed our daughter the various ways of the soil, but my disobedience stripped me of that land, my father’s land.

With a jerk the woman veered left and right for coverage under trees that stood by the stream. I fought to think over the pain and wind, remembering that there was a town just ahead. How would she know that? I thought back to Liam’s dead body, but before then he had mentioned a man, Talon? What did he have to do with me?

Without looking I could sense we were near the town, the horse had slowed a bit and began making frequent turns. Even with my face in her back the stench of ale reached my nose, we had to be near the inn. We slowed considerably and took two sharp turns, coming to a stop. She got off fast, before I could unclasp my arms from her waist I was down with her, at the last second managing to land on my knees.

“Sorry.” She said moving to the horses head.

I breathed heavily under the ache of my body, the gashes and bruises excruciating. I looked up to see her tether the horse to the end of a dark stall and run out passed me. The animal's breathing was shallow and I couldn't help but feel bad for it. I crawled over the hay and leaned against the wall, my back screamed at the pressure. I bolted forward and leaned on my knees and hands. The woman stepped in front of me and a dim glow lit the space just above me, I could see the yellow of the hay and the brown of the dirt below it. She stepped around me toward the horse, the sound of metal on wood peaked my curiosity. I looked up to see her fixing a bucket in front of the animal, who began lapping up water in an instant. She turned and sat against the wall opposite me, handing me a cup of water and keeping one for herself. I gulped my water down, almost choking on it. I threw the cup to the ground and focused on my breathing, she just watched me, hardly taking a sip of her own water. After a moment I leaned back and sat, careful to keep space from the stall wall. She was studying me, and I her, yet there was nothing to gain. She was calm, hadn't even broken a sweat.

"So, who are you?" I asked exasperated, she was no trader.

She didn't respond right away, as though contemplating her next move.

"I am Rhona, bounty hunter."

Chapter One: Rhona's Story

Light disappeared behind the horizon, leaving darkness to blanket the sky and let the moon stand on its own, soaking in the salt of the sea. Waves bobbed the ship but remained calm as the crew moved to and fro making sure everything was in place. Each man had a job, checking the cordage and keeping the sails on point. The ship was large, a cargo ship for one of the main trading companies in Vicloran, and held two masts. Keeping out of the way a woman shrouded in black sat alongside the rail on an overturned crate, her legs crisscrossed beneath her. The hood she wore hid her face, the cloak reached and gathered on the wood of the deck.

Many of the men were skeptical of their new traveling companion. She had made no motion since she sat down in that position two hours ago, her face yet to be revealed. Their captain claimed he had not seen her countenance either, but the money was too good to worry about someone's facials. With the night being so calm and the work set for now, a few of the men had gone below deck and brought back a couple flagons of ale. They reveled in each other's jocularities until one became hostile in inebriation, his gaze continued to rest on the mysterious traveler.

"Ey, why don' I jus show a lady a good time, heh?" He laughed drunkenly, the other's with him. He swayed in his stupor, the hem and haw of the boat made him check his balance. Sure of his feet he strode over to the woman, discerning no real shape to her form but ready to find out.

"'Ello ma'rm, fine weather we'r haven'n, you shou' take a load ov, take ov that cloak." He slurred as he reached out and grabbed her shoulder and noticed a small hook before he was immediately pinned on the railing. She pulled out a dagger in a flourish and placed it at his throat. Sensing the movement of the other men she whipped out from within her cloak a

collapsible bow that pulled the string back using the hook on her shoulder. If she closed her hand on the grip an array of barbs would shoot into her targets.

They all stood still as she held one man down and was ready to take down several more with the pressure of her fist. The captain emerged from below deck, his gaunt appearance rather comical in the given circumstances, but he commanded his ship.

“What’s going on here? You, let my men go.”

Waiting a second to make sure her message was received, she dropped her arm with the blade and unhooked her arm with the bow, collapsing the weapon and replacing it on her belt. The man scrambled away, a thin line of blood at the base of his throat. She kept her head down as she faced the captain.

“You, come with me to my quarters.” He said with authority, and turned to his crew. “Get back to work.”

The crew hastily set about their duties, leaving the ale to be kicked about on the deck. The woman followed the captain below, taking each step so gentle he turned around to see if she was still behind. They continued forward to a door that opened into his private quarters, an eclectic room: from long red and gold ornate rugs to the strangest collections of nymph figurines and Victorian clocks. Just ahead of them was his massive wooden desk, covered in maps and letters. Oil lamps hung in the corners to light the room with a warm glow, while one candle resided on his desk. He sat behind the desk, motioning her to sit in the chair opposite him, a strong wooden chair with ornate impressions of vines that came forth from the feet. She remained standing.

“M’ lady, you really mustn’t frighten my crew like that, now I have to look like I’m reprimanding you,” he said leaning back with an uneasy expression. “Or something worse.”

She stood silent for a moment, trying to ascertain just what it was he planned to do.

"What is it you plan, then?" She asked coolly.

"A chat, is that alright? You really must calm down." He motioned again for her to sit.

This time she did, gathering her cape into her lap, her hood still covered her face.

"My dear, why for all the secrecy? Am I really not to see your face at all this trip?"

"That is what I wish to maintain, yes." She retorted. He looked at her confused, and a little worried.

"I suppose that is for you to decide, might I at least have a name?"

She paused and debated the consequences. News of her exploits would have to get back to the council of her homeland Quidahb through word of mouth.

"My name is Rhona."

"A unique name to be sure, unlike mine, Captain Sandy."

"...Sandy? Sir?" Rhona asked confused, she had never heard such a name.

"Yes...Oh I'm sorry, it's short for Sander, but I suppose it may be unique to you," He said thoughtfully. "my name is fairly common where I come from."

"Where is that?" She inquired.

"I'm from Phlannen, it's a small land to be sure but its home," he smiled contentedly, unable to see Rhona's downtrodden expression he asked her the same. "Where are you from, my dear?"

She kept her head still and did not answer, that information was not necessary. Captain Sandy slumped a little in defeat, he had hoped to have gotten somewhere. He stood and walked to the wall beside him where shelves lined the section of the wall and housed many various

knickknacks, one of which was a box that he took and placed on his desk. He opened the lid and removed a thin wafer-like piece of bread.

"I'm sure you're hungry, I got this on a deal trading in the north."

Rhona took the piece and ate several bites, her ravenous stomach wished to devour it but her collected mind resisted. Sandy sat back in his chair, munching on his own slice.

"This would go great with cheese, but cheese is hard to come by at this time of the year." He said, hoping to dilute the silence. Picking up on his intention, she swallowed the bite of bread.

"Thank you for your hospitality, I would like to turn in for the night"

"My dear you shall stay in here," He said. "I do not trust my men to leave you alone, and I do not trust you to let them live."

"Are we close to Vicloran?"

"Indeed we are, didn't I tell you this was the fastest merchant vessel in the east." He smiled merrily and went to his bed on the side of the cabin, knocking away crumbs and making sure the blanket and down-feather pillow was comfortable. He turned down the vibrancy of the oil lamp that hung against the wall of his sleeping area. Pleased with his work he set off towards the door.

"Thank you, but I must ask, why are you being so kind to me?" She asked in appreciation. "I haven't exactly given you a lot of reason to trust me."

"Simple," he said, still smiling. "I have a wife and children at home I wish to see more than all the trinkets in this room."

Sandy nodded his head goodnight and closed the door behind him. She was alone in the room, the various footsteps of the crew above were muffled. Rhona sat on the bed, a cubbied-out

area along the edge of the room that not only housed bedding but a ragdoll she found beneath the matt. She studied the doll, its simple creation and life at sea was wearing it down, the once vibrant colors had turned dark and the salty air eroded some of the strings that kept it all together.

Rhona remembered having had a doll like this with its pigtails sticking out like trumpets and its dress covered in intricate swirls that her mother embroidered herself. She would make the doll fight using a stick she found in the grass. The doll followed her mother's lead. To hold back the tears Rhona held her head back, her hood falling to her shoulders. Her swarthy complexion glowed in the candle light, shining off her black hair that pulled to one side and held together by a length of leather. Her big almond eyes gave an air of smoky seduction but the pool of tears cast them upward.

She looked down to let them escape but wiped her cheek, unwilling to let more fall. Her memories suppressed for the time being she laid the doll back where she found it and stood, walking to the desk to inspect the maps and letters. Ignoring the snuffle of her nose she rifled through the letters to see if any were of some importance. A letter was stamped with the seal of the Vicloran Trading House, the main organization that regulated trade and the processing thereof, an extension straight from the king's hand. She opened it, being careful to preserve the seal, and scanned the letter. She found nothing of extreme worth but noticed a change in policy.

"It appears the king is setting up stricter security at every port." Seeing nothing else of real interest she folded the letter as it had been before. "I wonder what that's about." She grabbed the candle from the desk and held it to the underside of the wax, careful not to singe the parchment. As the wax grew softer and softer on the underside, she placed it back down to seal the letter. Rhona blew on the wax just in case but believed the letter to be sufficiently secure.

The rest of the desk proved of little importance, routes were traced on the map to ports she recognized from her study of the land as she prepared her journey. She began to rifle through his shelves and knickknacks but only found their strange visages of any kind of interest. Rhona stood in the corner, a little miffed that she managed to find the one trader who had a moral compass and followed it. She had expected more from her first lone voyage away from home, not what she would call adventure, although she was proud of herself up on deck.

Resigned to having found nothing, Rhona decided some sleep was in order. She strode across and lay on the mattress. Feeling an uncomfortable bulge and she pulled out the doll. The memories she had suppressed came round again. She fell asleep as her memories engulfed her, the doll held between her hands.

"Women are not of the fighting class," a voice rang out. "The home is your battleground."

Rhona's mother and father were in the courtyard, each dressed for battle play, their tight pants yet baggy tunics moved with every thrust and parry. They wore belts around their abdomen's that held various knives and a couple of trick smoke bombs for energetic distortion. Rhona sat at the table on the porch as a child, proud of her father but admiring her mother. They held staff's and continuously swung them at each other, the smack-smack of the staff's colliding ricocheting off the walls of the house. Slight grunts could be heard from both her mother and father as their weariness became apparent, but they did not stop. Since their childhood, they did not stop. Rhona hoped someday to do the same, be as great as her mother.

Her mother in fine clothing and done hair walked up to her. Her mother and father in fighting garb were still fighting in the background but this mother sat next to her, wearing a slim

dress of embroidered indigo, the sleeves pouched to her wrists. Her black hair lay down but was pinned back with an ornamental flower clip.

"Hello dear." She smiled warmly.

"Hello mother." Rhona smiled at her mother, then turned to watch her mother and father fight, her mother swinging at his head as he ducked in time.

"You mustn't watch me so."

Rhona turned to her pretty mother.

"But why, mother?"

"The ways of this world are unforgiving, your life is your own, but I cannot be there to protect you."

Suddenly her mother was struck with an invisible force, a gash stretching over her body from her shoulder across down to her hip. Without a sound she fell to the ground like a feather. Rhona shrieked as she tried to help her mother, she turned to her father and mother in the courtyard. They stood and watched.

"Help her!" She yelled, but they made neither response nor move, their expressions blank as the pool of blood engulfed the porch, her mother dying in Rhona's arms. She ran to her father for help who turned old with every step, her own age increasing. The fighting mother was now gone and all that was left was her bedraggled father and her own adult self. The courtyard was dismal now, unkempt as the years dragged on.

"Father, why didn't you do anything! You let them kill mother!" She yelled at him, his worn and wrinkled face downcast, hearing nothing. A staff appeared in her hand as she grew angrier; attempting to strike her father he raised his own staff in defense of the blow. The voice of his young-self came through the old man's mouth, calm and steady.

"You are like your mother, I loved your mother."

"Then why did you let them kill her!" She swung again only to be blocked once more.

"She was strong, like you are, I miss her."

"Shut up!" She made for one more strike but was yet again thwarted.

"She loves you, but you risk your own life to prove hers."

She stared at him with anger, breathing shallow and quick, the tears wet her cheeks.

Before she could get another gasp out her father transformed into her mother and hugged Rhona, engulfing her as a little child in the folds of her dress. Rhona cried into her mother's stomach and held her tightly, hoping to never lose her again. She looked up into her face but only found her father's peering down at her, his warm expression covering the pain that still lingered in his eyes. The anger she held was overcome as they embraced each other, her adult-self hugging her aged father.

"You are not to leave." He whispered.

"I must."

She stood back, her father miles away from her, increasing in distance as she stepped into the water, her bare feet dipping in sand.

"The home is your battleground."

With a start Rhona awoke, the doll still clutched in her hands. A round of knocks came from the door. Quickly she put the doll back and laid her hood over her head.

"Hello? Are you awake?" Captain Sandy called in.

"Yes I am captain, come in." She replied as calm as possible and stood at the edge of the bed. Captain Sandy came in merrily; his hands came together in a loud clap.

"Well m' lady we have spotted land and will be to the port by midday." He went over to his desk and put a few papers together.

"Thank you, captain, you've been a genuine help." She said.

"You are mighty welcome, but please think nothing of it," he said smiling.

She smiled from under her hood; the urge to show her face to such a jovial and pleasant man was growing with his mood. To dispel the impulse she changed the subject.

"What is it you're bringing in to port?"

"Oh just several crates of imported wine, and a few unmarked crates."

"Unmarked?"

Captain Sandy stopped for a moment, a look of displeasure crossing his face, as though he shared more than he should have, but his old smile was back as he spoke.

"Don't worry about that, if ole Sandy don't worry, you shouldn't worry." He said as he sauntered to the door, he turned before leaving. "There's grub in the galley."

She was alone again as the captain went to inspect his merchandise. Finding that her stomach was rather bare she made for the galley. Rhona was only familiar with ships in the sense that she had ridden on one when she was a little girl, but she made do with her observations to find what she was looking for. Many of the rooms she passed were the sleeping quarters of the crew, beds varying from hammocks to covered straw on the floor. Just beyond those she found the dried meat and biscuits out on a table, but they hardly looked edible. She poked through the cabinets to find stacks of salted pork, but it was too early to roast them. Resigned to endure her hunger she left the galley in hopes of finding those unmarked boxes in the hold.

Towards the stern she saw the shipment and Captain Sandy checking items off his list. Rhona hid in one of the rooms the crew slept in and kept watch as he inspected the cargo. For a

moment Sandy paused with a look of confusion but was distracted by his first mate walking to him.

“Captain we’re coming upon the land sooner than we expected. We should be in port in two hours.”

“So soon? I suppose the winds have been with us this journey.” He looked back at the crate with confusion. His mate noticed.

“Captain? Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing of importance I’m sure...yet...” Captain Sandy looked from his paper to the cargo again.

“Captain, as first mate, I must tell you that the men are growing worried in dealing with the Vicloran Trading House, they feel we may be getting in over our heads.”

The captain sighed in agreement.

“There will be no barratry on my ship, but tell the men this will be the last arrangement, I too feel there is something stirring in the waters.” Captain Sandy said. “Prepare the captstan and dunnage for cargo transport.”

With a quick nod the first mate departed, followed by the captain down the hull and towards the stairs, up to the deck. Rhona took her chance to inspect the mysterious cargo. There indeed was no stamp on the crates but Rhona could make out a small impression of the Dregg Kingdom insignia, a falcon in flight with a dove in its beak, the grooves almost invisible to the naked eye. Dregg was known for its aggressive policies, few were willing to trade with the treacherous nation. Before she could move for a closer look the sound of footsteps halted her movement. Into view came Captain Sandy, a look of suspicion was hardly masked by his desire to be trusted.

“What are you doing here? I told you the food was in the galley.” He said.

“I seem to be attracted to secrecy.” She responded.

Sandy was silent as he gathered his words.

“I think it’s time we go on deck, we’ll be to the mainland soon enough.”

Reluctantly Rhona left with the captain toward the stairs, the vision of the emblem played in her mind as she wondered what ominous trading could be underway.

Chapter Two

Rhona rode to the castle on a horse she had stolen from port. A river that flowed just in front of the castle stopped her, but the guards on the opposite bank were ready to help a woman along. They lowered the draw bridge to allow her passage over the deep waters. She rode across slow and commanding. Finally over the bridge she stopped and she waited for their instigation.

"Hello, madam, what business might you have here?" The burlier of the two said, his heavy countenance making his partner look appealing in comparison, regardless of his missing eye.

"I've come to speak with Lord Eamon on business of trade." Rhona said firmly.

"You, miss? How do you have knowledge of such a market?" He replied patronizing, his partner snickered beside him.

"I am wife to Ardan, the renowned tradesman in the east and he has entrusted me to speak to your lord until his arrival. It would do well to fetch your lord than pry into his affairs."

With a straightened humph, the burly man stalked off to fetch the owner of the estate. Rhona was left alone with the one eyed guard, his wrap covered the empty socket. She made sure to stay silent and keep her gaze forward, taking note of the lustful glances from the guard. Soon the burly man returned, his countenance more sour than before.

"A thousand pardon's, m'lady. The lord is waiting for you in the great hall." He said smugly as he and his partner held the gate open. Rhona made no acknowledgement and spurred the horse forward underneath the archway of the castle wall. The grass of the upper bailey was vibrant in the sun and various workers went about their daily routines. A servant boy came up to her, his young face void of carefree expression.

"Hello! M'lord sent me to take your horse while you stay here." He said.

She half smiled and got down from the animal.

"Where will you be taking my mare?"

"To the stables, of course." He said. She smiled and handed him the reins. He led the animal across the lawn and into the lower bailey where he disappeared from sight behind the wall that separated the baileys. Men had noticed her arrival and gathered to get a better look. Eager to get things moving along she strode across lawn, bypassing the custom of being escorted to the great hall. She knew where it was, she knew where everything was. The layout of the castle was in her mind's eye due to hours of studying various accounts of people having been here.

She progressed along the dirt paths that led to the man she was to meet, noticing the postern of the wall on her right. Men on the wall watched as she proceeded. She moved like she was walking to her troops, ready to discipline them, as she passed into the middle bailey and reached the main of the castle. Remembering the layout, she knew all the points of entry, but she was expected so any sort of snooping would wait. She came up to the thick wooden doors that led inside and knocked with vigor.

After a moment the door opened without haste, revealing a middle-aged man in cleaner garments than she had previously seen at the castle. His weather worn face was set in boredom, his girth surprising for a man who answers his lord's door.

"Are you the guest we have been expecting?" He said confused.

"I am." Rhona responded curtly.

"Might I have a name to present to my lord?" He was getting annoyed.

"I am Branna of the Banijya house, wife to Ardan of Banijya."

He nodded and closed the door. As she waited to be let inside Rhona studied the distance from her position to the postern she had noticed traveling through the upper bailey, to the horse stables just outside the lower bailey, she needed an exit strategy. The door opened again but the man held it wide opened and stood off to the side, inviting her in without saying so. Rhona stepped over the threshold onto wooden planks that made up the floor. A large corridor greeted her, going just off to her left and wrapping around to the right of her, and right in front, two yards away, was the doors to the great hall.

"My lord Eamon is waiting for you in the great hall." The man startled Rhona and walked forward.

Rhona hastily followed after him, regaining her composure. He opened the heavy door and walked through, holding it open for her to proceed through. Eamon sat at the end of the table but stood at Rhona's presence. The smell of bread and spiced meat wafted through the room although the table was bare. She was put off, her plans hadn't included staying here so long, the need for an escape route was all the more important now.

"Thank you Kieron." The man said with a deep voice, dismissing his assistant. Kieron nodded and left the room. "I must say, I was not expecting *your* arrival after my many correspondences with your husband, I thought he respected me enough to be here himself."

Rhona half smiled at the left handed remark but remained cool at the thought of writing those letters.

"My husband certainly does respect you, that is why he sent me ahead when he knew he would be delayed."

"But, m'lady, what are we to talk of until his arrival?"

"Business, of course," she said pointedly and strode further into the hall, sitting down at his left. "My husband and I run the trade together, I am no silent partner, so I know the ins and outs of our company and will prove as no hindrance to our meeting."

Eamon looked at her coolly, uncertainty furrowed in his brow as he pondered her words.

"Be that as it may, when is your husband expected in?"

"Tomorrow morning, no later than midday."

He took a moment to think things over. A servant came in holding a tray of mead and attempted to place them on the table.

"Oh no, that will be unnecessary, bring out wine for the miss." Eamon said bothered.

"But why?" Rhona asked as sweet as she could muster and grabbed the mug of mead and drank.

Eamon pondered her seriously but waved the servant away, and down.

"I want to apologize, the great hall is no place for meetings, it is for food and comradery."

"No need, this is a lovely hall and business can't be done on an empty stomach."

Eamon half smiled.

"You may stay in the room I prepared for your husband."

Rhona nodded in appreciation and drank from her mug. Steaming piles of mutton and corn were brought to the table, Eamon reached for the fare first. She waited until every servant was gone before beginning their conversation.

"I would like to know who your largest partners are."

He laughed.

"Why do you need that information? Some partners require discretion and we are prepared to honor that regardless of size."

"We merely want to know who all we're going into business with," Rhona said casually. "We want our reputation to remain intact."

"Well I can promise you, if we had a partner that would tarnish our name we certainly wouldn't ally with them."

Rhona thought of the impression on Captain Sandy's cargo, of the Dregg Kingdom. She watched him carefully, his smug demeanor betraying his idiocy.

"There have been rumors that Vicloran has associated itself with one of the most aggressive kingdoms of the south," Rhona watched his slight twitch. "I believe the name was...Dregg?"

Eamon coughed into his mead, wiping what splashed onto his face.

"You know what they say about rumors." He looked at her with harshness, she struck a nerve but she knew when to move on.

"Regardless, what share will my company receive?"

"You receive a ten percent profit from every load transported."

"Ten percent? That's all?" Rhona asked shocked, even she knew that was absurd.

"That's what happens when you want to partner with big business, we do the heavy work while you simply sail across the sea."

"The straight that connects our lands have been swarming with pirates and much of our supplies have been lost, sailing is no longer simple. We will need a larger margin of profit and a level of protection."

Eamon took his time chewing, feigning interest. After a few silent moments he swallowed his meat and took a drink, Rhona's trigger finger tapped the table.

"I can promise a modicum of protection, these are rough times my darling, the pirates are everywhere."

Unsatisfied, Rhona continued.

"You would not aid a partner?"

Eamon tilted his head back in an exasperated chuckle.

"My dear woman, this kingdom is in the most profitable point of its history, what benefit might we have if we were to ally ourselves with Baniyya?" He asked. "We avoid using smaller merchant crafts, such as yours, they pose too many risks in transportation and thievery."

Rhona remembered the letter sent to Captain Sandy from the Vicloran trading house, his set up certainly fell under the classification of small merchant. Eamon continued:

"What we have to ship is far too valuable to put in the hands of some raff crew."

"What is so valuable that raff crews will desire?"

Eamon was annoyed but Rhona intrigued him.

"Large items, servants, cattle, wine, silk if we're lucky, though we make a reliable profit on our grain."

"Sire, we may add to your profits and you can increase the kingdom's standings amongst the rest. Although Vicloran has proven itself not to be trifled with, its reputation for relationships in trade is the lowest I've seen."

"My lady, you don't understand, the reputation we maintain is the opposite in our eyes," He replied softer, almost sweeter, he stretched his rough hand over Rhona's. She forced herself

from flinching. He continued, "It is not amiable relations that make money, it's the fear of losing that relation, and it's one that we have maintained with splendid results."

"Do you not think you could accomplish more by maintaining both views?" She persisted as she removed her hand from under his. Eamon sat up straight.

"My dear, I suppose such tactics are better spent somewhere else, maybe in the market place, but when it comes to the world you cannot threaten a man's family and expect them to appreciate the flowers you send for their deceased."

A silence settled over the room as Rhona contemplated her next move.

"Then I suppose that is all we have to discuss, until my husband arrives." She said with an icy stare. She slid her chair back and stood, Eamon courteously stood as well. Rhona took her time walking out of the hall toward the main doors. With one last glance into the hall Rhona thought she saw a servant in the stairwell that led to the kitchen but thought little of it as she proceeded to the stable.

The stable was a long wooden building that housed many horses, the ground covered in hay and reeked of dung. Towards the back Rhona found her mare, its coat looked sleek after a thorough brushing by the stable boy.

"Hello miss, are you leaving?" He popped his head out of the tack room just a few feet beyond her.

"No, no, I wanted to see my mare, I want to take her out for a ride," she said. "If that's alright?"

"So late miss?"

"I love night rides." Rhona thought of the many rides she had taken with her mother under the glow of the moon.

"Suite yourself, miss."

The kid shrugged his shoulders and moved to help put the saddle back on her horse. Using a stool, he stood up and heaved the saddle from the wall of the stall onto its back, crouching underneath the belly to tether the straps together. Finally he fitted the bit and harness onto its head, handing the reins to Rhona.

"There you are miss." He said with a half-smile and went about his work.

"Thank you," she said and led the animal out. Rhona gently spurred the horse on along the outside of the castle in search of the postern. As she rode around the bend of the wall she saw the woods that flanked it, a semi-dense area that appeared pathless. She went in with care, the many bumps and holes of the ground fatal to her horse if it lost its footing. The trees were healthy and held many leaves and limbs towards the sky, only leaving a strip of stars and moonlight visible. She continued forward, keeping as close to the wall as possible and looking for any break that was the postern. As she moved on and the trees became thicker, Rhona noticed a path up ahead, a dirt path yet containing the telltale marks of horse hooves and carriage wheels. Not much longer she came upon the path and the postern it led to, the break in the wall she was hoping to find. It was hardly discernable in the dim lighting but her eyes were trained in the dark.

"Nice shady spot for some shady deals." She said to herself as she stopped to inspect the break. Through it she could see the upper bailey and into the middle, barren of any servants. She turned back to the path that lead away from the break and into the woods. Feeling secure in her emergency exit, Rhona took the path, the horse trotted along as it made its way through the wood. The grooves of a wagon were becoming more visible, what she assumed meant water was

nearby. Thinning out, the woods opened to a stream and the flat grass land beyond it. If she looked long enough she could see the road that might've brought the mysterious wagon there.

At the edge of the stream she slipped off the horse and let it drink, careful to secure the reigns on a nearby branch. She patted the animal's rump and walked back into the woods, her cloak flowed past her as she hastened with each step. Deciding to take a short cut through the postern she veered left towards the wall. Taking a quick surveillance of the bailey and any possible guards on the wall, Rhona slipped in through the break.

Just outside the doors of the great hall she heard a few grunts and groans from within, the sound of fighting. Slightly opening the door she peered in and saw as Eamon kicked a man off of him, but the man was quick and rolled to a standing position. Eamon only chuckled.

"Is that it? You've had ten years to concoct a plan and this, this is it?" He laughed with a grin that made even her want to slap it off. "I should have listened to Talon and killed you back then."

Rhona's heart stopped in that moment, she hadn't heard that name in years. She had grown up with Talon, had been his friend, had hoped to be more, until the council banished him from the kingdom. He had slaughtered a whole village, claiming they had been traitorous to their king. She saw the man straddle Eamon with a knife pointed at his chest, Eamon attempted to choke his attacker, but it was not to last, as the man slid the knife into his chest. Rhona had to ignore the thoughts about Talon but she had to bring the man with her. His motivation to kill Eamon may be advantageous.

"We need to go, now!" She grabbed him hard and yanked him up toward the door. They ran out into the middle bailey where they kept along the stone wall until they came upon the

postern. Rhona wasn't sure if this was the best plan, as she had only intended to go things alone, but maybe having a partner would help. She continued to pull him through the woods as they angled east and heard shouts coming from the castle far off. The wood continued on, she could feel him slacking a little at the constant pace and heard faint grunts of pain. Not much longer and they were in the clearing she had left the horse. Letting go of his hand she swiftly positioned herself on the steed.

"Quickly, get on! We don't have much time!" She pulled him up before he could say anything. She clicked her tongue and dug her heels into the horse, now rushing alongside the stream towards the east. He clung to her abdomen and buried his head into her back as she continued to spur on the horse, the rushing wind made her eyes water. Focused on getting away from the castle she kept along the path of the stream. On the map in her head, she knew there would be a town coming up. The moon shown down as the pair made their way through the night, momentarily hiding themselves as they passed under trees, jerking left and right to do so. She knew the horse was getting pushed to its limit but the town was getting close. The man was straining to keep his arms around her waist, Rhona only hoped it wouldn't trigger one of her weapons.

The tops of buildings and a bell tower came into view, growing larger as they approached. The town was small enough that it didn't call for a gate and guard. Already aware of the layout, she steered right to the inn and into the stables behind it. Only a few people were up in the town, but they were too drunk to make any fuss. They found an empty stall and settled there, sliding off the horse faster than the man could let go. He fell but managed to catch himself on his knees before his face could meet the ground.

“Sorry,” Rhona said as she moved to the horse’s head, tethering him to the back post. She heard him and the horse breathing heavily and decided to go grab water for each of them. Outside the stable, she snuck into the inn where men and women were singing along to a bard. The bartender was distracted as she grabbed some cups and snuck back out. She grabbed a bucket from beside the stable and headed for the well not too far off. The rope was stiff as she pulled up the bucket of water and filled the bucket, then the two cups. Rhona made her way back to the stable and lit the lamp just inside before proceeding to the horse with its bucket. The man was on all fours when she came in, his tunic was spotted with blood on his back. After placing the bucket in front of the horse she brought over a cup to him, leaning against the wall opposite him. He gulped it down and remained on his knees, his hands on his lap as he breathed hard.

Rhona sat against the opposite side, sipping her water as she maintained her breathing. She watched the man. He was an older guy with shaggy hair, wisps of white were visible throughout. He had a strong face but it was hardened with faint scruff, old smile lines appeared to be stained rather than used. She wondered what drove him to kill Eamon as he winced every so often. After a moment her companion spoke.

“So, who are you?”

She wasn’t ready to trust him, not yet, a lie was best for now.

“I am Rhona, bounty hunter.” She was curious as to who he was, he may seem scraggily but there was something more to him. “And you are?”

He took a moment but answered.

“I am Liam, murderer.”

Bridge

She asks him why he killed Eamon, he is vague about how the man wronged him but otherwise moves on from the subject. He asks what she is doing helping him, she explains that she is here for the man named Talon. Liam recalls what Eamon had said about a "Talon" person,

and asks Rhona who he is. Rhona explains that he is a traitor to her home land and he is probably here inciting unrest in Liam's kingdom. She is here to take him back to be tried and ultimately hanged. She endeavors to persuade Liam to work with her in removing Talon from power. He is hesitant, wanting to leave Vicloran after killing Eamon, but Rhona convinces him Talon will do a lot of harm to the kingdom if he is not removed. He concedes, hoping that removing this man may redeem him for his family's death.

Liam and Rhona stay the night in the stable. In the morning, Rhona notices blood on Liam's back and heads out to the apothecary to get wraps and treatment before he wakes up. As she is out she notices guards about asking questions regarding them. Quickly Rhona heads back to Liam who is already up and rinsing his face in the horse trough. She tells him of the guards asking questions. They head out of town through a back way that leads right into fields, undetected. They take their time but continue to look back just in case. On their ride they discuss working together to capture Talon: Rhona thinks of her past relationship with Talon and her real desire to overtake the kingdom herself; Liam thinks of killing Talon before Rhona can take him back and plans to leave the kingdom afterward to start a new life. They stop for a moment so Rhona could cover Liam's wounds, asking him how he got them. He talks of protecting a fellow in distress and leaves it at that. She lets it go and moves on about their plan. They decide to work together to capture Talon so Liam suggests seeing his friend Carrick whom he fought with in the army, Carrick would have connections with trustworthy people in the kings guard, giving them eyes and ears around the kings castle. Rhona agrees and they head out to Carrick's.

When they reach Carrick, Liam explains who Rhona is and what they are hoping to accomplish. Carrick recognizes Talon, having heard his name when given orders, goes on to say that Talon had recently ordered his soldiers to pilfer large amounts of metal from a town. Carrick

takes Liam aside and asks more about Rhona and if she was to be trusted. Liam agrees that she doesn't appear to be entirely forthcoming but Talon had to be removed regardless. Carrick provides Liam with a list of officers that may have a closer ear to the ground than he in palace matters. While Carrick and Liam are aside, Rhona takes the chance to look through Carrick's documents, seeing shipments of weaponry and metal, noting that trade of food stuffs were almost non-existent. She ponders how a black man had worked his way through the ranks to such a high position as she reads through his orders to commandeer metals from a town. Together again, Carrick provides Liam with fresh clothes and the two with faster horses, taking the one they had ridden in on.

Liam and Rhona head out to the first name on the list, Donal Rossan. On their way Rhona feels like they're being followed. At the home, the man appears jittery to Rhona. Liam discusses Talon with Donal who appears not to have heard who he's talking about, this worries Liam and so decides not to bring up Carrick's name. Donal never mentions orders of collecting metals. Before Liam could question him further shouting came from outside. Liam accuses him of calling the guard, which Donal confesses to, saying Liam and Rhona should be careful where they stick their noses. Rhona is tired of the man's voice and so spins around as if to kick him in the head but catches him between her thigh and calf and brings him down to the ground, snapping his neck in the process. This astonishes Liam as they run out, fighting guards off: Liam fights barehanded while Rhona whips out her bow mechanism and throwing daggers. They make it to their horses with most of the guards taken down and head out.

Night was coming so they decided to make camp once they felt they were safe. They found an area in a stretch of woods at the edge of a plain. As darkness overtook them they saw the fires of several campsites on the expanse of grass, discerning that it was a regiment of guards

awaiting them. Liam discusses how the soldiers they fought at Donal Rossan's were not in typical Vicloran garb and looked foreign, this causes Rhona to ponder those in the plain and thinks that Dregg make have more at play than just trade. Keeping this to herself, they discuss the next name on the list, where Liam suggests separating so Rhona can get weapons: thinking to himself, Liam realizes that this last name is by his brother Galvyn's land and wants to visit him alone. Uncertain as to the real reason Liam wanted to separate, Rhona decides it would give her a chance to meet with her own contact; she needed to know more about this Dregg business. They sleep until before dawn to head out, before the regiment would wake.

Liam heads to his brother's home and land, but before meeting with his brother he goes through the land he and his family had tilled. The house is gone and the field is covered in a crop of grain, presently being worked by several field hands. He leaves before being noticed, heading to Galvyn's home by passing his brother's field which was being cultivated by workers as well. The door is opened by Liam's brother, whose smiling face turns serious at the sight of him. Galvyn wants to know what he's doing there. Liam lies and says Eamon sent him out to collect items at a nearby town and decided to stop by since he was on the way, but Galvyn doesn't want him there. Liam talks about his wife and child, making Galvyn softer towards him. Galvyn discusses the honor that Liam lost when he defied an order from a superior and caused his own family's demise, but he takes pity on Liam and reluctantly gives him a pistol, ammunition, and a few daggers. Galvyn makes it clear that he doesn't want to see Liam again, as far as he was concerned his debt as a brother has been paid and that Liam is no longer a member of the family. Accepting this, Liam takes his leave, the anger of losing every bit of family fueled him to take out Talon all the sooner.

Liam goes through the woods on his way to meeting with Rhona. Talon drops in on him and begins taunting, asking if Liam really knew Rhona. He makes it clear that Liam is being lead into a position he won't be able to leave. Liam is tired of talk and goes after Talon, who easily dodges the attack. Talon mocks him for allying with a deceptive person. With Liam's back turned, Talon leaves without a trace. Liam goes on, seriously pondering who Rhona is and what her true intentions were. He considered how well Talon seemed to know her, but if he was willing to approach Liam then Rhona must have a good reason for targeting him. He ignores his worries and continues on to the edge of the woods that hug the wall of the palace where he agreed to meet Rhona.

From the campsite, Rhona leaves in the opposite direction. She leaves through the woods they camped in, with a feeling that someone was following her. At the edge of the wood she stops and calls out, Talon lands on the ground in front of her. Rhona asks him what he's doing there, he tries to make friendly banter, bringing up their childhood. She stays serious; he brings up her family, but she changes the subject and asks him again why he's there. Talon says he has plans and is vague about getting what he rightfully deserves, that their homeland Quidahb didn't appreciate what he could do. Talon compliments Rhona in her abilities and invites her to join him, to prove to their homeland how capable they were. Rhona agrees Quidahb needs to open their eyes, but Talon was going about it wrong. Talon asks what Rhona was doing there, implying they weren't all that different. He attempts to kiss her but Rhona turns her face away. He disappears behind her, she ignores his departure and nudges her horse on.

She continues on to the nearby town to meet her contact, a friend from her homeland. She kept her hood on while she moved through the town, leaving her horse tied up in the stables of the Tavern. In the corner she sees who she's come for, a brash blonde woman kicking a guy into

the wall, accusing him of stiffing her in a poker game. She is surrounded by men as she takes the man's money from the pouch on his belt and leaves him there unconscious. The men around the woman attempt to attack her but are immediately stopped when she whips out her pistols, a new design that held multiple lead balls as ammunition, and when Rhona walks up with her dagger on a man's throat and her bow mechanism aimed at another.

The men leave, letting Rhona and her friend sit alone. Her friend, Aurea, tells Rhona what she's heard in her travels, about a man from Dregg having an audience with the king five years ago. The man hasn't left since and is rumored to be influencing the king's decisions. Rhona believes the man must be Talon. This surprises Aurea as she remembers Talon from their childhood. They discuss how Talon became involved with Dregg, knowing that he was rather eccentric when they were younger. Rhona says she will do what she has to in order to get him out of the way. Rhona thanks her friend for the information and asks about getting more weapons, Aurea takes her to the local blacksmith and into the backroom where she gives Rhona ten daggers, two rolls of barbs for her bow mechanism, and a pistol. Rhona thanks her again and sets her horse to leave.

Liam and Rhona meet at the outside palace wall hugged by the woods. Rhona notices Liam acting strange but he says nothing, trying to focus on reaching Talon. Moving on, Rhona uses her rope mechanism to get Liam over the wall, attaching it to his waste. She uses her daggers to dig into the wall and climb up. They drop down into the main courtyard and make their way through the baileys and into the castle. They sneak through a couple of rooms, one of which being the study of Talon where Liam finds a letter. The letter is written to Talon from Rhona's father, disowning her for going against the council's wishes of infiltrating Vicloran. He keeps it to himself, planning to stop her after Talon is gone. Getting passed a couple of guards

the two slip into a bedchamber that happens to be the king's. The king is asleep, bedridden, and sickly looking. Rhona investigates the cup of tea by the bed, recognizing an herb called foxglove. She concludes that the king has been slowly poisoned over the years, Liam warns Rhona that someone was coming. Rhona hides under the bed just as Talon and a group of guards come in. Liam recognizes the guards as those from Dregg, remembering their merciless nature, before Talon hits him. He falls hard to the wooden floor and is dragged out. Before Talon can search through the room one of the guards pulls his attention elsewhere, leaving Rhona to search through the castle to find Liam.

Liam's Story: The Final Chapter

I awoke with a searing pain in my temple, a constant ringing blurred my vision. The stone floor made my joints ache and muscles stiff but I forced myself onto my hands and knees. Last I could remember was being in the king's room with Rhona. Rhona! I jerked my head up but a pain worse than before knocked me back down. In my momentary glimpse I saw the glow of candles bars of a cell. The dank stone and musty smell made me sick to my stomach. Slowly I looked up again, the faint flicker of light cast shadows of the rods along the wall. Echoes of footsteps sounded through the hall and into view came the man that knocked me out.

"Are you still lying down? After I went to all the trouble of bringing you a visitor." Talon said, pulling a woman into view. My heartrate spiked as Lena came into view, with great effort I stood.

"Lena..." I walked to the bars, now able to see the bruise on her face. She was smeared with dirt and tears, her dress torn and caked with mud. Anger welled within me as I turned to Talon. "What did you do to her?"

Talon smiled and motioned for me to step back. Reluctantly I did so, allowing him to open the cell door and thrust Lena inside. I caught her before she could fall and hugged her to my chest.

"I thought you could use a friend, since Rhona got smart and left you for dead." Talon said locking the cell. "Although I do apologize, a dungeon is no place for a reunion."

With one last smirk he turned and walked out of view, his footsteps disappeared down the hall until there was silence. Lena sobbed in my arms. She wasn't supposed to be caught up in this, not like this. I brushed her hair back and hugged my cheek to her forehead.

"Lena..." I whispered. "What happened?"

She took a moment to collect herself and pulled away.

"That man came to the castle a day after you left. He started asking questions, but I didn't tell him what happened Liam, I swear!" She choked back tears.

"You didn't have to do that, Lena, you would've been safer to rat me out."

"Safer? What does that matter if it puts you in danger?" She asked, concern evident in the furrow of her brow.

I dropped my gaze, unable to believe that someone would do such a thing for me. I turned away and looked around the cell, rubbing the throbbing knot on my head. There was an old bit of molded hay in the corner that stretched into what I assumed was intended to be a bed. Three stone walls encased us, each looked decrepit yet unmoving. Lena spoke.

"Are we going to make it out of here?"

I paused, unsure of the answer. My wife stood in my mind as I turned to face Lena, her bruised face sparked guilt. I decided to be straight with her, and promise nothing.

"I...I don't know."

She drew in her breath as tears welled. She turned away from me, one hand on her hip and the other covering her mouth. I wasn't sure what to do anymore, the torn fabric of her dress had me worried about what really happened to her. Talon was going to answer for everything he's done. I took a step toward her when she spoke.

"Why did you do it?"

I stopped, she continued.

"Why did you kill them?"

I swallowed and rubbed my head, wincing at the knot above my temple. I breathed deep, there was no more hiding.

"That man, Eamon," I started though every nerve in my body told me to keep silent, I stared at the floor. "he...murdered my wife...and little girl."

She spun to face me. I had never told anyone what happened to them, not even my brother, Eamon had taken the liberty. I had to accept it now, the possibility of moving on. I forced myself to make eye contact with Lena, my own emotions threatened to roll down my face. She meant well but I only saw pity in her eyes, I turned away and regretted it all. Unexpectedly her hands were around my waist, hugging me from behind. My back was still tender but I couldn't pull away.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know..." she whispered, her hot breath soothing my sores.

"That was the point." I responded softly.

I turned around, breaking her hold in the process, and embraced her. We stood there for a while, a tear or two rolled down my cheek. I stood back. She wiped my face, yet somehow she maintained peace within her. I cupped her hands.

"We need to get out of here, or at least figure out what Talon has planned." I said. "Did he say anything to you when he brought you here?"

Lena was quiet as she thought.

"Not really...he just said he was going to take me to you and something about..." She paused for a moment. "...a surprise."

"A surprise?" It didn't make any sense, but Talon always seemed rather odd to me.

"And something about a girl, her name started with an 'R.'"

I furrowed my brow in confusion and shock, unable to understand what Talon was getting at, but all that mattered was getting to Rhona and fast. The pain in my head throbbed once more, dispelling any thoughts that attempted to form. I walked over to the moldy hay and

eased down on it, leaning my tender back against the chilled wall. I closed my eyes and rubbed my head, feeling Lena sit down. She leaned on me and rested her head on my shoulder. I appreciated her comfort as I wrapped my arm around her. We sat until we fell asleep, the dank air and cold stone periodically woke me, but exhaustion held me there.

A rapping rang from the bars like someone with a tin cup. Lena and I woke with a start, our stiff joints aching from the uncomfortable sleep. I looked up to see Talon moving a blade along the bars.

"Good morning you two, I see you've gotten close." Talon smiled ominously. "Like a real family."

I rose with my anger and went to him.

"What the hell are you getting at?"

Talon remained calm.

"It appears Rhona is better at hiding than I gave her credit, and she tore apart my guard, she really has grown since our childhood." I narrowed my eyes in confusion, making Talon smirk. "I bet her mother's death only fast tracked her progress really."

"What are you talking about?"

"What? She didn't tell you?" Talon chuckled. "I suppose not, assassins aren't known for their openness, especially those of the rogue nature."

"You're the rogue, I recognized the Dregg soldiers with you from my military days." The letter I had found didn't let on that she was an assassin, though her combat style pointed in that direction. One thing was for certain, Talon was a larger threat.

"Did you now?" Talon said. "Then you of all should know how persistent they can be."

I eyed him, what could he be planning with them at his beck and call?

"Like their own prisoners," he continued. "I will not go easy on the two of you, and they will see just what I'm capable of."

With that Lena was by my side.

"What are you saying?"

"My dear, I intend to kill you."

Lena stared at him, then at me, but I saved my glare for Talon.

"What are you planning, Talon?" I choked back the anger I held, his threats meant nothing until Lena was involved.

He chuckled.

"Everyone will know soon enough, the world will know."

"And what exactly does that mean—"

"It means you've lost, everything." Talon stated. "Now if you both would kindly come with me, I'd like to find my old friend."

Four bronze skinned guards stood into view from either side of the cell.

Lena and I walked through the dungeon in shackles, passing by a few empty cells. As we passed the last remaining cell I saw the beaten body of Carrick slumped and passed out in the corner. I tried to tear away but the guards were strong and kept me in line, my guilt mounted as more friends were ensnared in this mess. We went up a spiral staircase and exited through a door that was hidden in the wall, stepping into a room with tables and bookshelves. It looked to be the king's study. To the right of the entry was a ladder that led up to a landing with a simple desk. Daylight came in bright through the window, illuminating the various ornate rugs that decorated

the walls, swirls of red and gold detailed various hunting game. Talon walked over to one of the tables and stood beside it, the guards leading us behind him. They forced us down to our knees while they positioned themselves around the room, two guards behind us, one at the entrance and the other in the corner adjacent.

I looked to Lena whose worried face made my guilt all the worse, she shouldn't be here, and Carrick... With a start, Talon's voice rang out.

"Rhona! I have something here you may want."

Only silence greeted us. Talon just stood there, his back to us. I looked around and hoped Rhona would appear, though I was in no position to help if she did.

"How do you even know she's here?" I asked hoping to jar Talon.

"The heap of bloody bodies in the hall was one indication." Talon said matter-of-factly.

I couldn't argue with him, she was capable of far more than I was. No matter her intentions, she's one hell of a woman.

"Rhona! I've got your friend tied up here, and another bit of motivation."

Talon yelled again, but his annoyance started him pacing. I scanned the room for any movement from Rhona.

"Rhona! I'm getting tired of waiting, and I know you can hear me!" Talon turned and grabbed Lena by the collar, yanking her to her feet. "Come on out Rhona, or I'll kill her."

"No!" I tried to get up but the guard forced me back down, I struggled in vain to break free. Lena looked back at me, the fear in her eyes swelled with tears. My own fear was growing, I didn't know what I would do if I let Lena die.

"Come on, Rhona," Talon bellowed. "You've always been too good to let someone innocent get hurt, remember our childhood? You would stand up to me when I was just having a little fun with the street raff. The good old days, so they say."

Talon looked about, his grip still firm on the back of Lena's dress. I was still pressed to my knees under the guard's hands, any struggle I made was quickly overcome. Talon tightened his grip on her, the seconds stretched on as we all waited for Rhona's appearance. I couldn't help but wonder if she had in fact left, I needed her now more than ever, but Talon didn't seem to think so.

With a flourish and a grunt, Talon thrust his sword into Lena's abdomen and swiftly pulled it back out. I screamed as Lena doubled over onto the table, blood pooled on the floor.

"No!" I forced my way up and landed my elbow in the guards face and went after Talon, hoping to use my shackles to strangle the son-of-a-bitch. He reacted fast, using his sword to parry my chains. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Rhona come from behind one of the tapestries, Rhona had been in the room the whole time? Anger drove me on but Talon had to come first.

I heard gun shots and dying screams from the guards as I tried again at choking Talon. He kicked me back with a solid boot to my chest, sending me hard against a bookcase. I struggled to stand, the wind had been knocked out of me and my head throbbed once more, my back raged with pain. Talon stalked toward me nonetheless.

"You idiot, you're futile chase to avenge your family," He mocked, coming closer still. "You're the man that defied the king, that defied me!"

Talon back handed me, the metallic taste of blood flooded my mouth.

"Do you really think your ignorant king has been running this country? I've been running this place since I first got here." Talon sneered. Just beyond him I could see Rhona finishing off the last two guards. "It wasn't the king who ordered your family's death, I did."

Hatred burned in my eyes as I stared at the man, smothering any physical pain so I could stand with ease, but before I could strike Rhona spoke.

"Let him go Talon, you were looking for me, well here I am," Rhona stood by Lena's body, her pistol aimed at him. Talon turned to face her, his smile soft and sickening.

"Can't save them all, can you Rhona?" He inquired. "You're mother, and now this girl, except you had a choice here. You let her die."

I slowly stood as I watched them, my eyes straying to Lena's limp body.

"I guess that's what makes us different."

"Different? Ha! The lives we lead mold us into one being, Rhona, we think the same way, in benefits."

Rhona cocked her pistol, motioning for me to move away. Step by step I made around the closest table.

"Go scurry back, the woman will always protect you, just ask your friend here."

I glanced again at her body, the pain of guilt and anger mounted as her blood dripped to the floor, but I only made my way to Rhona.

"Talon, I'll let you leave if—"

"Oh, you'll let me, will you?" He chuckled. Abruptly he vaulted into the air, flipping back and pushing off the bookshelf with his hands, thrusting himself back onto the landing. "No, I have too many plans in place, besides I want to show you something."

I could only hear the sound of a crate opening until Talon lifted a large metal object into his arms, nothing like I had ever seen before. I looked to Rhona for any guidance but she looked as dumbfounded as I felt.

“This is a weapon of my own creation, you should recognize it Rhona, it’s your mother’s design.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that but Rhona’s shock was evident on her face.

“What are saying?” Rhona asked.

“Oh don’t play dumb with me, this is the design that got her laughed out of all the officer’s clubs, to think a woman could come up with a weapon at all let alone the most brilliant one of our age.”

I still didn’t know what was going on but I didn’t need any other reason to want the guy dead. I looked to Rhona again for a plan but she was too concentrated on Talon, she was too close to this.

“Stop talking around it Talon, what do you want?” Rhona’s anger was evident.

“Fine, fine, you know us assassins Rhona, we like to lead people down that bunny trail,” Talon said. “This is the weapon your mother had only dreamed of, a weapon with a longer range than the pistol and a rapid fire rate. This machine carries over two hundred lead bearings and contains its own heating source for immediate firing, enough to get the job done five times over.”

I gaped in amazement, it’s impossible, no gun could ever do such things, and Rhona’s equally disbelieving eyes was not reassuring.

“That’s impossible.” I broke in, I was getting tired of all this talk, I needed action.

“I’m glad you said that.” Talon smiled. “You see this machine not only impressed the Dregg leaders, it gave me a commanding position.”

He pulled a lever back on the machine and repositioned into a sturdy stance. Without hesitation he opened fire at us, the sound of the machine so loud I thought I would go deaf. Rhona and I darted out of the way as the table was splintered with bullets, Lena's body with it. I never wanted someone dead so much. I forced a table over and hid behind it as Talon aimed his weapon at Rhona's new position. Taking this chance I ran out and pulled Lena's body from the table, her blood drenched my clothes. I laid her behind the overturned table, taking in the horror that had torn through her. I covered my mouth to prevent the escape of vomit, tuning out the gun fire and the tables Rhona flipped. I would have spent every moment beside Lena but there wasn't enough time. In an instant I tore down a tapestry and covered her with it. I had never been a religious man but I prayed for her, and myself. Tearing myself away from her I looked to Rhona who had barricaded herself behind two overturned tables. She motioned for me to go after Talon, which I agreed to whole heartedly. The sound cut out for a moment as the gun stopped, the silence rang in my ears.

"This is only the beginning! Soon a whole armada will be on Vicloran's shores with scores of Dregg soldiers and mercenaries. Vicloran will be my conquest!" Talon laughed out as he began another bombardment.

I ran to position myself right under the landing but Talon saw me first. Lead splintered the furniture around me. I just barely jumped out of the way and scrambled behind the barricade Rhona had created.

"Are you hurt?" Rhona asked, she must've thought Lena's blood was my own.

"No, no I'm fine." I looked back at the tapestry that covered Lena's body. Without warning the next barrage started, the tables took a horrible beating.

"These aren't going to last very long!" Rhona yelled over the maelstrom. "We need to stop him!"

I nodded but I had no idea how, I had never come up against something with such force, and to think Dregg soldiers were on their way to Vicloran. I looked at either side of the table, no bearings went past the edges.

"We need to separate! He's shooting right down the middle, if we split on either side we can both get a shot at him, but we have to be fast!"

Rhona grinned and slapped me in the arm. She handed me her pistol and readied her bow contraption. We looked to one another and silently counted to three. We split, I jumped to the left and immediately took aim at Talons chest, but I only hit the side of his abdomen. Rhona shot him in the shoulder, together our shots threw off his aim, sending bullets careening into the ceiling, winging my arm in the process. Talon wasn't down but the weight of the machine caused him to drop it. Before we could take a step he had jumped from the landing and out through the exit Lena and I had first been lead through.

"Come on!" Rhona ran after him, me close behind. We stopped at the stone stairs, one way leading down to the dungeon and the other upwards. "Which way did he go?"

"Up there!" I said running up.

We raced upwards, running round and round until we heard steps up ahead and a door flung open. Shortly we found ourselves on the castle battlement Talon had arrived only moments before. He was on his way toward the edge when he turned around as if to say something to us but Rhona didn't stop running and tackled him over the ledge. I ran to the edge in surprise when a thin line of rope with a hook shot above me. Without thinking I grabbed onto the rope and wrapped my arm around it before it was pulled taught. Over the side I saw Rhona clinging for

dear life while Talon plummeted, deftly using his daggers to slow his fall. I lost sight of him through the trees of the wood below. With great strain I pulled Rhona up, the wound on my arm drained my strength and the blood made the rope slick, but I couldn't lose another life. I pulled and pulled until Rhona was able to grasp the ledge. I helped her over and stood back in exhaustion, catching site of Lena's blood on my tunic, blood that never should have been spilled. Talon was gone, now she had to be stopped. I raised the pistol and leveled it at Rhona.

"What are you going to do, Rhona?" I asked seriously.

"What are you talking about Liam?" She asked, gripping her arm.

"I know what you were really here for, to infiltrate Vicloran and claim it for your country, I can't allow you to do that."

She looked down at her arm and shook her head.

"What you say is, or was, true. I came here to take Vicloran, but Talon..." She said dejectedly. "he was right, he and I are more alike than I wanted to admit."

I remained silent, hoping she had changed her mind.

"I sought nothing more than the recognition of my father and country, I was blinded by my desire to earn the honor my mother deserved."

With my wounded arm I took out the letter I found in one of the studies and held it out for her to take. She looked at me quizzically but received it, her visage turned sour as her eyes scrolled the page. She stood back, her eyes darted the ground as though the letter was displayed on the stone. I saw the desperation in her eyes, remembering my own drive to avenge my family. I wanted to do the same for Lena, but her murderer was already gone.

"How...how could my father do this..." She said more to herself than to me.

"He's...renouncing me..."

We remained silent for a moment as Rhona absorbed the letter, she looked over the edge Talon had fallen. She shook her head.

“It was futile to begin with, to think he would accept this...” She said. “But it doesn’t matter now.”

I wondered what she meant until I remembered Talon’s words.

“The Dregg armada, they’re coming here.” I said as the realization of an impending invasion settled in.

“That’s our priority now,” Rhona said seriously. “We have to defend Vicloran, and find Talon.”

“Find Talon? He’s dead, I saw him fall into the forest.”

“He’s not dead, the daggers slowed his drop and the trees cushioned his fall.” Rhona said without-a-doubt. “He will be back.”

Epilogue

We left the castle together, first freeing Carrick from the dungeon and retrieving Lena's body. I carried her as Rhona and Carrick fought off the oncoming guards. Hurriedly we made our way to the stables and rode off, dodging arrows and outrunning the remaining Dregg soldiers. We needed to raise an army in little time so we rode four days to reach the neighboring kingdom in the west to seek audience with its king. Before we crossed the border I dug Lena's grave, my arm straining from the wound taken by Talons machine. I found her a beautiful resting place by a weeping willow. The sun turned a deep red orange on the horizon and the tree swayed in the breeze as I placed her in the ground. She was still wrapped in the tapestry I first covered her in, a red background and golden stitch work of a gorgeous fawn. I stroked her hair before throwing in the first shovel of dirt. In a sling, Rhona walked up beside me as I continued to layer the dirt.

"I'm so sorry, Liam." She said sincerely. "I wanted to save her, but I missed my chance."

I focused on the dirt, tears caught in my throat as each layer hid the vibrant red. I didn't hold it against her, the kind of man Talon was, he wouldn't have let Lana go regardless. Rhona stood by my side as I finished patting down the mound that covered her. Carrick waited with the horses just beyond the tree.

"I wasn't able to bury my wife and child," I said, catching Rhona off guard. I was tired of not talking about them, trapping the grief to a point of hatred. "Eamon whipped me as I screamed over their bodies...I blacked out from the pain, when I woke I was in a dark room lit by a small fire in the hearth. I'm afraid to know what became of their bodies."

I let the wave of grief overcome me, I fell to my knees and sobbed on the handle of my spade, ignoring the throbbing in my arm. Rhona's hand clasped my shoulder.

"My mother was never taken seriously as an assassin," Rhona said, I swallowed my tears and wiped my face to hear her. "but that didn't stop her, that's how she died, protecting me from the invaders that had come to our home...she died in my arms."

I looked up at Rhona, her own face wet with tears. I pulled her down to kneel with me. With my arm around her, we stayed there until it was dark. Me telling stories of playing hide and seek with my wife and daughter, and her of dancing with her mother in the moonlight. A fire glowed a distance off where Carrick set up camp. Saying one last goodbye Rhona and I walked to the campsite and greeted our new companion. He looked up with a nod.

"Beautiful night."

We sat down on the grass, I stared into the fire until my eyes hurt and compressed my wound.

"We should make it across the border by midday," Rhona said. The silence of the night was warmed by the crackle of the fire.

"I can request an audience the moment we cross," Carrick added.

"Are there any military leaders in Vicloran that are still trustworthy?" I asked hopeful.

"I'd like to think so, but there's no way of knowing, considering what happened with Donal Rossan." Carrick answered. "Are you sure Talon survived the fall?"

Rhona nodded her head.

"No doubt, assassins are trained to fall from their vantage points."

"So we have to overcome that maniac and an armada of Dregg fighters? Tall order." I commented. "What's going to happen to Vicloran while we're rounding troops to fight them?"

“Unfortunately, it will be at the mercy of those fighters in the palace, and Talon.” Carrick said looking to Rhona. “With any luck we can gather an army large enough to hold off the incoming fleets before too much damage is done to our kingdom.”

Our situation was not ideal, I didn't want to leave Vicloran in Talon's hands for any amount of time, but Dregg was coming and we needed to be prepared. The families I had vowed to save were being left on their own...I shook the thought out of my head, I knew this was the only way to save any of them. I lay down, exhausted from digging, pain, and the ever growing reality that Vicloran's future rested in raising an army.

Rhona's Story: The Final Chapter

Rhona had to find Liam fast, not telling what Talon would do to him. Before he was dragged off she overheard one of the guards mention a woman, but figured they were referring to her and snuck back down the hall where she saw two guards walk past. She waited for them to be out of sight before she moved on. Hurrying down the hall she took a left then another right, avoiding a servant carrying a tray of food from the kitchen. The kitchen was empty save for one last servant putting various pots back in their places. Rhona snuck in undetected, coming up behind the man. She covered his mouth while she positioned a dagger at his back.

"I am going to ask you a couple of questions, you're going to answer them, and I'll be on my way, nobody's hurt. Deal?" Rhona spoke firmly in his ear, he assented with a nod. She removed her hand and spun him around, his black hair was cut close to his head but his nose stood out. "There must be a dungeon in this castle, how do I get there?"

He looked confused but didn't hesitate at the glint of Rhona's dagger.

"I'm not sure but I heard there's a way through the game room on the upper west side through a hidden door in the wall."

"What do you mean game room?"

"Tapestries are hung along the walls depicting various hunting game."

He spoke fast, keeping his eyes on the blade. Rhona wanted to know what the servants knew of Talon, and how long he's been around here.

"Hm...what do you know of Talon?"

He broke his gaze and looked around the room, an air of annoyance about him.

"He's been here for only five years, came in one day for an audience with the king and suddenly became *my Lord*."

“What do you mean *suddenly*?”

“I was told to obey the guy almost immediately, Eamon threatened to imprison us if we didn’t. We’ve hardly seen the king since.”

Rhona nodded to herself.

“Thank you.” Swiftly she spun him around and knocked him hard with the butt of her dagger. He collapsed to the ground. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Checking the halls, she left the kitchen once more. The castle was larger than Eamon’s, a silly attempt to look authoritative, but she saw past the decorative tapestries and artsy paintings. Rhona passed a portrait of a previous king, a dated visage of a bearded man wearing a pointed cap. She chuckled and moved along, coming to hallways that branched from the main she was on. The left was clear but the right had a servant slowly lighting the sconces along the wall. Rhona moved to the empty hall, keeping her eyes on the servant until he was out of sight. The last sliver of sun filtered in through the panes as she proceeded down the corridor, hues of red and orange painted the stones. Various sconces yet to be lit lined the wall, the hall curved to reveal wooden doors along the right and a set of stairs at the far end. In the hopes of speeding along the search she quickened her pace toward the steps.

As she approached a surprised guard stepped down into view. Without breaking stride she deftly quick-footed against the wall and used her foot to push off, wrapping her other leg around his head. She flipped his body with hers. They landed with a thud, Rhona repositioned herself over his body and jabbed her hand at the base of his throat blocking his airway. In one move she twisted his neck and killed him instantly. She paused to hear if anyone was coming. The silent hall gave her time to hide his body in one of the nearby rooms.

Two steps at a time she made it to the top of the stairs and peered around the corner. The corridor was empty as she moved on through, fewer rooms lined the way but soon her way diverged and she was forced to turn again. Thinking over the floor plan of the first floor, she moved to the left. Only a few paces down she heard a group of men and the tell-tale clink of swords against stone. She pushed into the nearest room, what looked like a spinning room for teaching noble maiden's the way of wool. Rhona heard the muffled guards through the heavy door, their footfalls stopping nearby.

"Do you seriously think she's still in the castle?" One gruff voice asked.

"Does it matter what we think? We search and continue searching until the lunatic is satisfied." Another voice chimed.

"Well I'm taking a break, we've been looking since the sun started setting." A third man stated. Rhona counted only three men as they all agreed, she could easily dispel them in a matter of moments. She readied her daggers and bow, peeping through the key hole to check their backs. Two were turned away from her, more than she would have needed. She burst from the room and slashed at one of the throats, and shot her bow at the guard's eye facing her, kicking out the legs of the man that still had his back turned. On the floor she stomped her boot on his throat and dug the knife deep into his chest. The sound of a large number of guards alerted her, before she could hide away they were in the hall. At seeing their fallen comrades they charged her, she was unprepared to fight off ten guards but she had no place to run.

The first man ran at her with a sword, she dodged out of the way and knocked him out with the hilt of the dagger, sending him falling past her. The next swung with his sword, with her blade on his she swirled it away with her dagger, and jabbed her hand into his throat. A lead ball shot past her, almost hitting her dead on. Rhona was tired of this. She grabbed the swords from

the men she felled and readied them in either hand. The next round of men was fast upon her, slashing with both blades through a man's chest and penetrating the belly of another she floored two more. A shot hit her in the leg, knocking her to a kneel. Ignoring the pain she grabbed a sword from the man's belly and swung at an oncoming man who dodged to the ground before being slashed from chest to hip with Rhona's blade. She grabbed two daggers from her thigh and threw at the one with the pistol, one stuck in his forehead, the other in his chest.

Four men rushed on her, knocking her flat on her back. They pinned her arms but she kicked a man away hard in his sternum, feeling the break of several ribs. With that momentum she freed her other leg and wrapped them around another's neck, twisting this way and that until his neck broke. She hiked up her legs to kick the men pinning her arms down, freeing her from their grip. She was up fast and ran toward the end of the hall. Refusing to leave anyone standing, she turned and faced them. Only three men challenged her now, they looked determined but uncertain. With a quick flourish she popped the bow back out, hooked it on her shoulder, and sent three barbs into the chest of each man.

Together they fell to the ground. Rhona lowered her weapon, a spread of bodies laid before her, blood pooling on the floor. As her adrenaline receded, the shot in her blood soaked leg throbbed terribly and her wrists hurt from being pinned down. She went back to the room of spinning wheels, recalling bundles of wool and linen stacked in the corner. Rhona grabbed some of the woven cloth and created a tourniquet on her leg. Satisfied with her work she landed in one of the piles of wool yet to be spun. She bet Talon wouldn't make a move with Liam if he still had guards looking for her, so she rested on the wool, remembering the years she spent learning the wheel and how her teacher had criticized her harshly. Rhona had broken off the spindle and

threatened her with it. She chuckled at the memory but soon fell silent remembering how she blushed when Talon praised her for it. She was asleep before she had another thought.

She woke early in the day, but her leg was stiff as she moved about. She checked the hall, the bloody corpses still lay where she fell them. Limping down the corridor she looked through rooms on either end until she noticed a large door with vine-like engraving. Rhona found the room the servant had talked about when she saw the various tapestries depicting hunting game along the walls, a lofted landing was in the corner of the room with a ladder to the top. Several bookcases lined the walls and a few tables littered the space. She was annoyed to have been so close to the room but hindered by a mere bunch of guards, but before she could search along the stone for the hidden entrance, the door opened. Rhona hid behind the nearest tapestry, finding a little alcove behind the fabric. She heard a group of footsteps and the clank of shackles as they entered, stopping at what sounded like the center of the room. She waited and waited not willing to make the first move, when Talon's voice rang out.

"Rhona! I have something here you may want."

She remained quiet and took advantage of the alcove to ready her weapons, setting her bow mechanism and pistol. Liam's voice came next.

"How do you even know she's here?" Liam asked.

"The heap of bloody bodies in the hall was one indication." Talon said matter-of-factly.

Rhona cursed herself for leaving the bodies out in the open, but the blood would've been evidence enough.

"Rhona! I've got your friend tied up here, and another bit of motivation."

She didn't know what he meant, but she heard Talon pacing. Rhona sighed to herself, thinking of all the adventures they had gone on as children, never would have thought they'd be in this position.

"Rhona! I'm getting tired of waiting, and I know you can hear me!" Talon yelled, followed by clanking of shackles and someone being moved. "Come on out Rhona, or I'll kill her."

"No!" Liam yelled, his shackles signaled movement but it sounded as though he was restrained. Rhona wished he'd stay calm as she attempted to study the faint shadows through the tapestry, she hadn't anticipated Talon pulling this move.

"Come on, Rhona." Talon bellowed. "You've always been too good to let someone innocent get hurt, remember our childhood? You would stand up to me when I was just having a little fun with the street raff. The good old days, so they say."

Rhona shook her head, refusing to let the past drive her decision. She lined up her shot with Talon's shadow. Before she could let lose the barbs she heard the soft twang of a sword as it left its sheath and a soft choking sound.

"No!" Liam screamed. The sound of a scuffle was cue enough for Rhona to pop out, using her right arm with the bow mechanism to shoot at the guard in front of her. She aimed the pistol in her left hand at the guard that struggled after Liam elbowed him in the nose. Both men went down in agony, before she could reset her weapons the other two guards were attacking her. She whipped out her daggers and dodged under the first attack, sweeping his legs and driving the blade into his back to force him to the ground. Ignoring Liam and Talon she moved to the next man, shoving his gun out of the way with her forearm and using the knife handle to punch him in the jaw, the blade slicing his cheek, then swiftly sticking the blade in his chest. He stumbled a

few steps back and he gave room for Rhona to run up. She ran up his abdomen, forcing the knife further in and the guard backward, pitching into a backwards flip where she landed with a flourish, one leg bent and the other outstretched.

She finished with the guards just in time to hear Talon speak to Liam who now lay on the ground against a bookcase, his mouth bleeding.

"It wasn't the king who ordered your family's death, I did."

Rhona was surprised as she ran up behind him and noticed the woman dead on the table. She didn't know that's what had happened to Liam's family, and to know Talon had a hand in it made her all the more sick. She aimed her pistol at Talon.

"Let him go Talon, you were looking for me, well here I am," Rhona stood firm with her pistol aimed at him. Talon turned to face her, his smile soft and sickening.

"Can't save them all, can you Rhona?" He asked. "You're mother, and now this girl, except you had a choice here. You let her die."

She saw Liam steadily get to his feet.

"I guess that's what makes us different." She said, trying to keep him distracted.

"Different? Ha! The lives we lead mold us into one being, Rhona, we think the same way, in benefits."

Rhona cocked the gun, motioning Liam to move away. He took careful steps around the table nearest Talon.

"Go scurry back, the woman will always protect you, just ask your friend here." Talon chimed. The look Liam gave the woman made Rhona realize that she was more than just some innocent victim.

"Talon, I'll let you leave if—" Rhona started.

"Oh, you'll let me, will you?" He chuckled. Abruptly he vaulted into the air, flipping back and pushing off the bookshelf with his hands to thrust him back onto the landing in the corner of the room. "No, I have too many plans in place, besides I want to show you something."

Rhona could only hear the sound of a crate opening until she saw a large metal object in Talon's arms, something she had only seen in sketches, her mother's sketches, but she was dumbfounded as to how he got the sketches let alone created the thing.

"This is a weapon of my own creation, you should recognize it Rhona, it's your mother's design."

She was stunned, it in fact was her mother's fast firing weapon which she had spent years working on but unable to acquire the proper amount of materials.

"What are you saying?"

"Oh don't play dumb with me, this is the design that got her laughed out of all the officer's clubs, to think a woman could come up with a weapon at all let alone the most brilliant of our age."

Rhona wondered how he had remembered so much.

"Stop talking around it Talon, what do you want?" She said angrily.

"Fine fine, you know us assassins Rhona, we like to lead people down that bunny trail," Talon said. "This is the weapon your mother had only dreamed of, a weapon with a longer range than the pistol and a rapid fire rate. This machine carry's over two hundred lead balls and contains its own heating source for immediate firing, enough to get the job done five times over."

She looked at him incredulously, she had never dreamed of her mother's weapon being so fierce.

"That's impossible." Liam cut in.

"I'm glad you said that." Talon smiled. "You see this machine not only impressed the Dregg leaders, it gave me a commanding position.

He pulled a lever back on the machine and repositioned into a sturdy stance. Without hesitation he opened fire at them, the sound of the machine so loud she thought she might go deaf. She darted out of the way as the table was splintered with bullets, the woman's body with it. Talon aimed his weapon at her new position but the weight of the machine made him slow. She was able to dodge out of the way again and grabbed the two nearest tables and layered them as a thick barricade. Rhona looked to Liam and saw him grab the woman on the table and put her on the floor by the wall, yanking down a tapestry and covering her body. He covered his face before looking over to her as she motioned him to make a move for Talon. He nodded and set to go but Talon stopped before Liam stepped over, the silence rang in Rhona's ears.

"This is only the beginning! Soon a whole armada will be on Vicloran's shores with scores of Dregg soldiers and mercenaries. Vicloran will be my conquest!" Talon laughed out as he began another bombardment.

Liam ran to position himself right under the landing but Talon saw him, bullets splintered the furniture around him. He just barely jumped out of the way and scrambled behind the barricade Rhona had created, there she saw a large amount of blood on his clothes.

"Are you hurt?" She asked sincerely.

"No, no I'm fine." Liam answered, looking back at Lena's body. A loud barrage of bullets tore into the tables.

"These aren't going to last very long!" Rhona yelled over the maelstrom. "We need to stop him!"

Liam nodded and glanced at either end of the table. Rhona tried to focus on surviving but the imminent threat of a Dregg army inched through her mind.

"We need to separate! He's shooting right down the middle, if we split on either side we can both get a shot at him, but we have to be fast!" Liam yelled.

Rhona loved the idea and slapped his shoulder in appreciation. She handed him the pistol and readied her bow. They looked at each other, silently counted to three, and split on either side. Rhona jumped out and aimed at his shoulder, a direct hit, while Liam hit the side of his abdomen, together they threw off his aim and sent bullets careening into the ceiling. Talon wasn't down but the weight of the machine caused him to drop it. Before they could make a move he jumped from the landing and out through the exit Liam was first lead through.

"Come on!" Rhona ran after him, pushing the door back open and stepping onto dank stone where one set of stairs led down and the others upwards. "Which way did he go?"

"Up there!" Liam said running up.

She raced up with him, running round and round until they were close enough to hear steps up ahead and the creak of a door opened. Shortly the two found themselves on the castle battlement, Talon had just arrived at the edge and began to turn around to face them, but knowing what he was going to do Rhona kept running and tackled him over the edge. Plummeting to the ground Rhona fought over Talon's grappling mechanism. She jabbed his nose with the heel of her hand and attached the contraption to her waist, pressing the release switch. Talon continued to fall as Rhona shot the hook up to the ledge and gripped the mechanism, hoping it would reach. With a jerk the rope went taught under her weight and smacked her against the side of the castle wall, fracturing her left arm. She looked down and saw Talon use his daggers to slow his fall along the castle wall, he fell into the trees of the wood below, using

the branches to further slow his fall. Rhona cursed herself for not having killed him when she had the chance.

The immense pain in her arm made her grip slip but she refused to let go. Soon she felt herself being lifted. She looked up to see Liam pulling the rope, one hand over the other. She noticed blood going down his arm and into his hands. She tried to step on protruding stones as she was pulled up, slightly alleviating her pain and, she hoped, his. It occurred to her that claiming this kingdom in the name of her family was no longer possible, the threat of Dregg mercenaries changed that. Rhona sighed what she could of relief, she no longer had to worry what to do about Liam. She didn't want to turn on him anymore. Finally she reached the top and Liam helped her over. He stepped back and took deep breaths. The sound of a pistol caught her attention.

"What are you going to do, Rhona?" Liam asked.

"What are you talking about Liam?" She asked nervously, gripping her arm.

"I know what you were really here for, to infiltrate Vicloran and claim it for your country, I can't allow you to do that."

Rhona looked down at her arm and shook her head.

"What you say is, or was, true. I came here to take Vicloran, but Talon..." She said dejected. "He was right, he and I are more alike than I wanted to admit."

Liam remained silent as he waited for her to continue, the pistol still level with her chest.

"I sought nothing more than the recognition of my father and country, I was blinded by my desire to earn the honor my mother deserved."

With one arm maintaining the pistol, Liam used his other to fish out a letter from within his tunic. She looked at him quizzically but took it, her visage turned sour as her eyes scrolled the page.

She read it

Talon of Ryght,

I have become aware of my daughter's betrayal to our house, leaving to overtake Vicloran in the hopes of gaining honor, a childish dream from a foolish child. This will not bring her mother back. Too many times have I had to explain her actions to the leaders of the council, I'm afraid they have forced my hand and I must disown my daughter. Though your traitorous actions disgrace me and my country, I ask that you contact Rhona to inform her.

Sam'mana Ghara

She stood back, her eyes darted at the ground as though the letter was displayed on the stone. All the planning and preparation...

"How...how could my father do this..." She said more to herself than to Liam.

"He's...renouncing me..."

They remained silent for a moment as Rhona absorbed the letter. She looked over the edge where Talon had fallen, she shook her head.

"It was futile to begin with, to think he would accept this..." She said. "But it doesn't matter now."

"The Dregg armada, they're coming here." Liam said quietly.

"That's our priority now," Rhona said. "We have to defend Vicloran, and find Talon."

"Find Talon? He's dead, I saw him fall into the forest."

“He’s not dead, the daggers slowed his drop and the trees cushioned his fall.” Rhona said without-a-doubt. “He will be back.”

Epilogue

They left the castle together, first freeing Carrick from the dungeon and retrieving the woman's body. Rhona and Carrick fought off the oncoming guards as Liam carried the woman. Hurriedly they made their way to the stables and rode off, dodging arrows and outrunning the remaining Dregg soldiers. They needed to raise an army in little time so they rode for days to reach the neighboring kingdom to the west to seek audience with its king. Their goal was to reach the neighboring kingdom in the west and slip seamlessly into their society. Before they crossed the border Liam dug the woman's grave, he had found a beautiful resting place by a weeping willow. The wound he had received from Talons gun made the digging all the longer. The sun turned a deep red orange on the horizon and the tree swayed in the breeze, Rhona watched from afar as he placed her in the ground. She hadn't mustered the strength to apologize yet, she had never hurt a friend like this before. In a sling, Rhona walked up beside Liam as he layered dirt in the grave.

"I'm so sorry, Liam." She said sincerely. "I wanted to save her, but I missed my chance."

He continued to layer the dirt, hiding the vibrant red of the tapestry that was wrapped around his friend. Rhona stood without sound, letting the quiet of the moment ease them both. Carrick waited with the horses just beyond the tree.

"I wasn't able to bury my wife and child," he said suddenly, startling her. "Eamon whipped me as I screamed over their bodies...I blacked out from the pain, when I woke I was in a dark room lit by a small fire in the hearth. I'm afraid to know what became of their bodies."

Liam fell to his knees, sobbing onto the handle of the shovel. Rhona clasped her hand on his shoulder.

"My mother was never taken seriously as an assassin," Rhona said choking tears. "but that didn't stop her, that's how she died, protecting me from the invaders that had come to our home...she died in my arms."

Liam looked up at Rhona, her own face wet with the tears she couldn't restrain. He pulled her down to kneel with him. With his arm around her, she winced at the pressure on her fractured arm as they stayed there until it was dark. Liam told stories of playing hide and seek with his wife and daughter, and she of dancing with her mother in the moonlight. A fire glowed a distance off where Carrick set up camp. Rhona waited as Liam said his last goodbye, then walked together to the campsite. They greeted their new companion, he looked up with a nod.

"Beautiful night."

They sat down on the grass, Rhona nodded to Carrick.

"We should make it across the border by midday," Rhona said. The silence of the night was warmed by the crackle of the fire.

"I can request an audience the moment we cross," Carrick added.

"Are there any military leaders in Vicloran that are still trustworthy?" Liam asked.

"I'd like to think so, but there's no way of knowing, considering what happened with Donal Rossan." Carrick answered. "Are you sure Talon survived the fall?"

Rhona nodded her head.

"No doubt, assassins are trained to fall from their vantage points."

"So we have to overcome that maniac and an armada of Dregg fighters? Tall order."

Liam commented. "What's going to happen to Vicloran while we're rounding the troops to fight them?"

“Unfortunately, it will be at the mercy of those fighters in the palace, and Talon.” Carrick said looking to Rhona. “With any luck we can gather an army large enough to hold off the incoming fleets before too much damage is done to our kingdom.”

Although she knew the oncoming army would be her greatest adversary, she appreciated Carrick's words, *our* kingdom. For years the only home she knew was her mother's lap, her country had turned its back on them far before the letter her father wrote. She held her fractured arm as she stared into the fire, silence from her campmates letting the weight of their situation sink in. The Dregg nation was fierce and known for their military skill, and with Talon in control of the Vicloran kingdom there was little hope for the country's people. Rhona wondered what her mother would do with such odds against her, but she already knew. Her mother fought to the death not for her country but for her home, for her daughter. Now, looking to each of her campmates, their worn faces frozen in thoughtful gazes at the fire, she was ready to follow in her mother's footsteps.